Introduction

Hendrik M. Vroom

General Remarks

Contextualization is a worldwide phenomenon and a challenge to all churches. This is especially true for the Reformed family because these churches accentuate very much the preaching of the Gospel and Christian participation in social life (tertium usus legis)—characteristics that refer to the local context. Reformed churches do not have archbishops, no shared liturgy or globally accepted confessions. Most of their confessions have been written under difficult circumstances with the intention of witnessing to the right understanding of the Word of God. At present most Christians live in the southern hemisphere, and this is surely true of the Reformed tradition. The churches united in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches total about seventy million members. Their church life, habits and opinions may differ considerably on many issues, although they will agree on old Reformed formulas as the solus Christus, sola gratia, sola fide, and sola Scriptura. If asked how we see the role of tradition and context in our interpretation of Scripture and our existence as Christians in the societies in which we live, differences will emerge. Some churches have been influenced strongly by the European Enlightenment, others by traditional Catholicism or other religious traditions. Within the “Reformed world” there are commonalities and differences.

Also in Europe, the old homeland of the Reformed tradition, people have much in common but differ considerably as well. Many of these churches are currently minority churches. The membership of the Reformed churches is nearly ten million people, with varying historical backgrounds. In the past Reformed churches in many Swiss cantons were the majority churches for centuries, but some at present are minorities, as in Geneva. In France Reformed churches are small, although their public presence may be greater than their membership would suggest. In Italy and the Czech Republic the Waldensian Church and Hussite churches stem from the pre-Reformation era. The origin of the small Reformed Church of Greece lies in American evangelical mission work among the Greek population of Turkey who later moved to Greece. The
origin of the Swedish Mission Church, with its mainly evangelical color, lies in a separation from the established Lutheran church. In Scotland and the Netherlands the Reformed tradition used to be strong, but both countries have become very heavily secularized and many people have left the church. The two Reformed churches in Germany are part of the Evangelical church with its strong Lutheran influence with many united churches in different provinces. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland the situation differs again: in England the church is a union of Congregationalists and Reformed churches, while in Wales some member churches stem from Methodism. The Hungarian churches are marked by their special history. After the first world war Hungary was divided into several parts that for half a century lived under Communist rule. There are Reformed churches in Hungary itself, in Serbia, Slovakia, the Ukraine, and a larger church in northern Romania.

Reformed churches in Europe live in divergent contexts, are organized in different ways, and are theologically pluralistic. During the last decades, and especially since 1989, European culture has been changing very quickly, becoming more individualistic, more wealthy, more pluralistic and, apparently as a consequence faith has been more private than ever before. At the same time many of the Reformed churches are in countries that are or soon will be members of the European Union—a process that tends to make their contexts more equal. The pluralistic and secularized culture with its separation of state and church and the churches’ minority status forces the churches to rethink their policy and their position in society at large.

This volume is intended to contribute to the exchange and common reflection upon some of the most challenging issues which Reformed churches have to face, the question of evangelization and mission, the issue of nationalism and the relation between church and society, and the various understandings of a belief which is very much at the heart of the faith of the Reformation, i.e. justification by faith: *sola fide*. The themes of this volume are:

- Mission, secularization, and pluralism
- Church and the national communities
- Justification, freedom, and solidarity

They will be discussed from various backgrounds. In this volume the editors reflect upon the differences between regional approaches; they attempt to understand their backgrounds and evaluate their differences. In the last contribution Odair Mateus, the theological secretary of
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WARC., reflects on the analyses of the situations of the various Reformed churches in Europe, the challenges they face and some points for further study.

An earlier volume in this series, by the theological committee of the European WARC, was published under the title *Reformed and Ecumenical* (2000); its theme is the contribution Reformed theology can make to the ecumenical movement. The restriction to Reformed churches and theologians is not intended as a form of narrow confessionalism but as a contribution to the wider ecumenical movement. A second volume deals with the pluralism that inevitably arises if one takes the tasks of inculturation seriously: *One Gospel—Many Cultures* (2003). The intention of the present third volume is to stimulate exchange on some major challenges that the European churches face and to further mutual understanding.

Part I: General Perspectives

The two articles in the first part of this volume are introductory. Choan-Seng Song (Berkeley, Hong Kong), president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and a prolific scholar on the task of churches in an endangered pluralistic world culture, discusses the implications of the Great Commission and of the fact that Christianity has not saved the world but often has made it worse. This balanced admission leads to a rethinking of the Christian mission and makes us humble as to the role of the Christian church in the postmodern world. Christian service in the world should reflect the service of Christ who came into the world not to be served but to serve, not to become great among us but to be least of all. For the rich it is not easy to enter the Kingdom of God—since it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle—which should be reflected in the style and aims of Christian mission. The center of the Christian life is freedom from captivity, which entails captivity by greed, power, and religion. This has deep personal consequences and should have deep theological and socio-political consequences as well—as Choan-Seng Song points out.

Next, Hendrik M. Vroom (Amsterdam) explores those theological consequences: is the freedom to understand the Gospel contextually a real gain or does it imply a lack in our understanding of the fullness of the biblical promise? Is not each contextual understanding limited and one-sided? The question is whether a contextually and thus historically bound and limited understanding of a regional church is legitimate or al-
ways falls short of the truth. This ambiguity of contextual understanding is discussed with reference to some rather conflictive issues that have divided and in most cases continue to divide Dutch—and other—Reformed churches. At stake is whether truth is a uniform and universally explicit belief or, on the other hand, a trust and openness to our context, a willingness to give an account to one another and readiness for a new understanding of Christian faith. What is the relation between the everlasting Word of God and the concreteness of the pro me (for me)?

Part II: Mission, Secularization, and Pluralism

Part II contains four contributions on the theme “Mission, Secularization, and Pluralism.” Two of them describe recent developments of national churches and the other two are case studies on actual forms of mission. Runar Eldebo (Stockholm) introduces the Swedish Mission Covenant Church and describes recent developments in Swedish culture with its Lutheran church, which until recently was the state church. Sweden is a very secularized country and the method of “participating” in religion, now known as “believing without belonging,” has been widespread in Scandinavia for a long time. The context of a secularized welfare state with a strong flavor of individualism determines the challenges for the churches. Eldebo ends with the dilemma that a great many Western churches face: do they serve the public in the needs they feel at the moment or should they challenge people to become involved and become transformed? In Song’s terms: does the church free itself from the old forms of its own organization and/or also help people free themselves from their captivities and religious needs as they feel them?

In the following contribution, Martien Brinkman (Amsterdam) describes a new development as can be seen in many of the capital and major cities in the European Union. Non-Western inhabitants are often Muslims from Turkey, Algeria, Morocco, Pakistan, Bangladesh and other Islamic countries. However, there are also great numbers of Christians, often from former colonies but many refugees as well. They have formed their own congregations and synods. Brinkman describes the developments in the urban areas with the plurality of cultures and religions, not unlike the Hellenistic culture in which the church made its entry into the world. The original population often lives in more pleasant and quieter villages or neighborhoods around the cities. While many mainstream churches have to face secularization and have sometimes lost their attractiveness for younger people, the new non-Western
churches stress personal faith and are frequently involved in help and care for those who cannot cope with the hardships of urban life and became addicted in one form or another. Could the old churches not learn from the new ones, often imported from their own former missions fields?

In many large cities a special sort of church community has developed: city churches. They may have very different forms, although many of them will be more or less interdenominational. Some have social programs and are politically engaged—Riverside Church in Manhattan is a well-known example of this sort—others try to open themselves to people who live in the apartment buildings in cities, may be lonely and looking for company, and just trying to cope with what life has brought them. Some have “high” liturgical traditions, others are open for experiments that are suggested by visitors and participants. Benedict Schubert describes one of those churches, the Open Church of St. Elizabeth in Basel, a church that looks for radical openness in order to serve all sheep that could feel lost. He shows the barriers that have to be taken down and discusses the dilemmas that such communities face.

Laszlo Medgyessy (Budapest) gives another survey; he describes the missionary efforts of a great number of organizations in Hungary. After an introduction on mission (and proselytism) he describes the temptations and tensions in post-Communist Hungary. Eastern European churches have found themselves in a completely new, confusing but dynamic situation after the fall of the Wall and the breakdown of Communism in 1989. Churches, especially the Reformed, started to rebuild a church life outside the church walls, with schools, institutions for care, etc. Medgyessy lists and discusses many of those initiatives, some by churches themselves and many by church-related organizations.

Christine Lienemann-Perrin (Basel) reflects in the final contribution in this section on the content and consequences of what has been dealt with in the other articles in Part II on the mission of the churches in this late or postmodern age. She adds a survey of the situation of churches in countries that have been suppressed by Communism and surveys the Reformed perspectives on mission in Central and Eastern Europe, which deals with the typical dilemma of mission and proselytism and the public responsibilities of churches in the post-Communist era. The second part of Lienemann-Perrin’s contribution discusses the central issues with which churches are wrestling, the drop in membership, “belonging without believing,” privatization and public life, a pervasive spirit of relativism and the drifting apart of church membership and
religiosity. Globalization, “the end of the grand narratives,” and the economization of life (the grand narrative of our times) are typical for Western culture and, by the way, are opposed quite strongly by some groups in other cultures. In the discussion of answers that churches give to these challenges, she draws on examples not only from the contributions in Part II but on her wide experience as well.

**Part III: Church and National Communities**

During the Reformation churches were national churches. The conviction that obedience to God and His will would help to live a peaceful and righteous life and that who has been forgiven and reconciled with God would be willing to thank God by living a Christian life made the Reformed tradition very conscious of social life and the organization of the nation. Readings from the Old Testament with its stress on a righteous and faithful life have been very much part of Reformed tradition. So in the Reformed majority churches the links between church and state have been quite close, with all of the attendant consequences, for better and for worse. We know what has often been said about the Reformed virtues of hard work and sobriety and its capitalist vices, but there is a deep relation between a more democratic and equal society and the confession that in the eyes of God all human beings are equal. One of the more dubious consequences of the political solution after the religious wars which followed the Reformation (and went hand in hand with the Inquisition) was that every state could have its own religion (but not every citizen). So religion became tied up with kings, dukes and aristocracies, with all its nationalistic consequences. The church could urge the government to deal with poverty and oppression and promote justice, but at other times the chaplains simply followed the armies and prayed for victory for their own side. Nationalism is a deeply ambiguous phenomenon. It should not be forgotten that churches in a minority position can adapt themselves to the ruling culture as well, although with less feeling of responsibility for their country they can concentrate more on conversion and the “narrow ways” instead of the broad ways followed by people that “rule the waves.” The dilemma of the European churches present in some of the chapters of the first part shows up time and again—will they continue to be “people’s churches” that welcome everyone the moment they need a good word, grace, help, a listening ear or conversion ... (!) or shall they concentrate on the sheep of their own...
flock, keep them together and take care that not one of the hundred is lost ....

In some parts of Europe Protestants have been minorities, as in Italy and the Czech Republic even prior to the Reformation. The history of the Huguenots in France is well known and explains the special place of the *Eglise Reformée de France*. Since the beginnings of Christianity in Hungary the Hungarian churches have had a very special relation with the Hungarian nation. After the partition of Hungary in 1920 the Hungarian people in Romania, Serbia, Ukraine and Slovakia felt they were living “abroad.” Nearly one third of the membership of the Reformed churches in Europe lives in countries that have been under Communist rule till 1989.

In the third part of this volume we deal with some examples of the ambiguous relationship between church and nation. The contributions stem from four different contexts in Europe.

The first contribution in this section, by Ferenc Szűcs (Budapest), sketches the context of the Hungarian Reformed Church and the dilemmas it faces. Since the foundation of a Christian nation more than a thousand years ago under King Saint Stephan the churches have had a very close relationship to the national community. Szűcs asks: Should they continue to baptize every citizen and sing the national anthem in church? The Nazi and Communist occupations of Hungary have left their imprint on the situation. After describing the idea of a nation and the biblical view of nations Szűcs takes positions on the issue of nation, politics and church—concentrating on a discussion with Karl Barth.

The next contribution has been added as a specimen of a contribution to the ongoing discussion on the place of the churches in a secular, pluralistic society. Piet Hein Donner (The Hague), the minister of justice in the Dutch government, defends the thesis that governments in the uniting Europe should strive for a pluralistic culture and not try to make Europe homogeneous and therefore culturally flat and superficial. Differences should be honored and dealt with carefully. The great number of Muslims in the old European urban areas—not seldom around a third of the population—and the tensions between the original and the new populations especially have triggered a call for cultural adaptation and more uniformity almost everywhere. Since September 11, 2001, tensions have grown, especially the fear of political Islam. There is a strong tendency to neutralize the public domain and to privatize religion completely. Donner opposes that policy. It is not the acceptance of difference that is conflictive but its suppression. In this paper given on Sep-
tember 11, 2003, at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, Donner stresses that neutrality does not exist. On the contrary, worldview traditions are necessary for the public and political domain and churches and other religious communities should have the chance to run their lives in line with their views. What is urgently needed is a public debate on how various traditions wish society to be. In that debate Christians will have their say, just as people from other religious and secular worldviews.

Iain Torrance (Aberdeen) describes in the next contribution the development of the national Scottish Reformed Church from its very beginnings to the contemporary legal situation. Interestingly, he supplies the percentages of the membership of churches and does not hesitate to compare the numbers of church marriages with attendance at matches of the Football League. Torrance also raises that intricate question of whether the church should draw clear borderlines between itself and “the world” or have rather vague borders and not such a strict division between “us” and those are “outside.” He refers to the discussions on the interpretation of Paul’s view of justification by grace alone from which he derives the point that Paul’s critique of “Israel” is the confinement of the obedience in faith to itself—which entails a serious warning against defining the boundaries of the Christian community too narrowly.

Anne Siller (Stadthagen, Germany) deals with the same issues: an open Volkskirche or a visible “communion of saints.” She does not want to play two insights off against each other—both of which are true—first, that the origin and reason d’être of the church is that it is a “chosen community” and, second, that it is a quite ordinary human organization at the same time. Siller sketches some main characteristics of the place of the churches in late modern Western and Central European society, a “churchification,” pluralism, and individualism and the consequences they have for the position of the church with respect to their place in the marketplace of traditions, the privatization of faith, and the ways in which the church can communicate its memories and hopes. In a discussion of the thought of Karl Barth, Wolfgang Huber, Helmut Gollwitzer and a church report on “The Mission, Journey, and Goal of the Community of Jesus Christ in the Present Time” she shows various aspects of the dilemma of an open Volkskirche and a free, confessing church. She ends with a discussion of four answers to the question of whether “our Volkskirche is a communion of saints or could at least become one?”

Michael Weinrich (Berlin) points, in the final contribution in this section, to some similarities and differences among the situations in the
four countries discussed in Part III. An important similarity is that all these churches acknowledge their social responsibility and are in this sense "people's churches," inspired and directed by a continually repeated rethinking of the biblical message—without such rethinking their political and social involvement would be just another ideology. All churches are pluralistic, because members feel themselves attracted either to a more charismatic, a more evangelical or a more liberal understanding of the faith and stress various aspects of Christian life such as spirituality, liturgy, the confessions and/or social-ethical issues. Most churches accept this inner plurality and are learning to live with it, how difficult that might be under the pressure of the modernization of society with its individualism, secularization and fragmentation. But how can there be easy solutions within a few years for the radical cultural changes that have occurred? Weinrich compares the contexts of those four churches and the differences between their "answers" to the challenges that they face, in as far as these can be seen in in this part of the volume.

Part IV: Justification, Freedom, and Solidarity

The fourth part of the volume takes up the doctrine of justification, the central confession of the Reformation and, in the Reformed churches, related immediately to sanctification. The modern understanding of justification may have moved away from its original understanding and have lost much of its freshness and power. Again, four articles deal with aspects of this justification, sanctification, freedom and solidarity.

First, Michael Weinrich describes what happened with the confession of justification by grace alone when it was understood contextually in the age of Romanticism and later that of individualization, in which the question how to find a gracious God is said to have been replaced by the question of the meaningfulness of one's life. God takes human responsibility very seriously and accordingly could not just sweep away sin and guilt. God's justice and His love forced Him to act and the central traits of the one Person God are loving-kindness and justice. He rejected sin and accepted sinners. The Cross is the very symbol of the damage caused by the human lack of relationship that allowed the world to suffer under inhumanity. Weinrich describes the ethical turn of Protestantism under the influence of Kant—Christians as successors of Christ—and the anthropocentric and individualistic turn to meaning with its stress on the "function" of religion. In line with Schlei-
ermacher’s understanding of religion as total dependence on God, some have explained justification in terms of its meaning for the individual, as the intrinsic value of every human being and the rest people may find in being loved by God—thus foregoing the deep ruptures of sin in human life and society at large.

Next, Roman Lipinski (Warsaw) begins with a description of the history of the Polish Reformed Church—marked by its minority position next to the Roman Catholic Volkskirche and a Polish history situated between the superpowers of those days. The dilemma of being a part of and being apart from Polish society is very clear indeed. He shows the difficulties of a marginalized church—that in its practical life serves the local communities in many ways.

In his contribution Jakub Trojan (Prague) criticizes the idea of self-realization as it has gone astray without the fuller context of God’s calling. Not all aspects of self-realization are wrong, but its individualistic flavor and its frequent relation to personal feelings differ widely from justification and sanctification as they are grounded in the grace of the crucified and risen Christ. The real calling is not that everyone may attempt to make the most out of little but to seek first the Kingdom of God, which entails minimizing many things that are prevalent in contextual society. Human identity is not negated but reached through a conversion from what seems normal.

Fleur Houston (Oxford) goes into the discussions on freedom and autonomy that in some ways are contrary to a deeper understanding of justification. She begins with the well-known distinction of Isaiah Berlin between positive and negative freedom and discusses the link between liberty—freedom from—and morality. This brings her to the relation between freedom, faith, grace and love in the thought of John Oman, John Baillie, and P.T. Forsyth who stressed the grounding of all things in the Cross. Houston relates love and justice and shows how the common phenomenon of debts can be used to vitalize the classical notions of gift, mercy, demand, judgment and forgiveness.

Finally, in this part Hendrik M. Vroom summarizes the articles on justification, freedom and solidarity in Part IV and adds some remarks about prevalent ideas in Western culture, such as the pursuit of happiness, the idea of self-development, the search for a common morality and the idea of a common humanity—and the philosophical presuppositions of those common ideas. From this he derives some considerations on the theme of pluralization and the witness of the church.
Part V: A Comment From Geneva / Latin America

The last contribution comes from Geneva, from the theological secretary of WARC. Odair Mateus. From his Genevan and Latin-American perspective he reflects on the contributions in this volume and stresses the importance of socio-economic and cultural factors that stamp the context of the churches. Mateus draws attention to new developments in ecumenical relations between churches that establish partnerships with one another in Europe as well as worldwide. This opens new perspectives of church “unity” that require further reflection.

The scope of this volume is how churches experience themselves and their mission in their context. This issue is not just “practical” but a mission of words and deeds, inner conversion and listening to the Word of God and at the same time a humble witness to an estranged world, of which the church itself is fully a part. The discussions in this volume correspond with the first two contributions and provide ample material to substantiate the claim that the church should not be an *ecclesia incurvata in se ipsa*, (a church curved into itself) but opening and welcoming and directed not only to personal needs but to social needs as well—but not bound to what people often feel the needs are and delving deeper to the real roots of sin and selfishness, be it personal, social or national. Contextualization in itself is part of the mission of the churches, but it is on the edge: should the church adapt to its context and lose both its identity and witness or should it find a way between the Scylla of easy adaptation to the changing contexts of “this world that is passing” and the Charybdis of a preservation of forms and identities of bygone times that have lost the freshness of the message of liberation of bondage, conversion and freedom, freedom to be what the church is called to be, a sign of hope, peace, reconciliation, justice and love?

The picture on the on the cover of this volume is a painting by Piet Mondriaan of the Reformed church in the costal village of Domburg in the southern part of the Netherlands (1910-11). Mondriaan’s father was the headmaster of a primary school in the eastern part of the country, active in the newly established Reformed political party that would help to transmit values in public life. He sent his son, who wanted to become an artist, to live with his friend, the publisher of theological and political works by Neo-Calvinists and the free church theologian Abraham Kuyper and his friends. Mondriaan joined the free church but later on,
like some of his friends, became a member of the Theosophic Society. His work became more abstract. The lines of the church of the village where many artists spend their summers became more accentuated and brighter colors were added. He began to stress the lines between heaven and earth and increasingly attempted to paint the inner, abstract forms of external, visible reality—the abstract forms, he claimed, are closer to the divine, the universal.¹ Some ten years later Mondriaan left the Theosophic Society as well, moved to Paris and later on to New York. It was the dawn of another world.

When has Europe not been in a process of transformation? Pluralism is not new; neither is secularization. For some, like Piet Mondriaan, the early twentieth century led to radical changes in their faith and life. Nowadays the attractions of unknown countries, foreign religions and sheer wealth are irresistible to a great many people. And the churches have to cope with challenges in a way that people have only begun to realize: “The Mission of the Church in the Transformation of European Culture.”