Workshop 9:  
Re-evangelization of the North:  
New Forms of Church Life in Post-Modern Societies

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There is a growing consensus in Roman Catholic, conciliar Protestant and Evangelical circles: Western Europe is no longer the center of "Christendom" but has rather become a mission field in its own right. Europe needs to be evangelized, or as some would claim, re-evangelized. "Re-evangelize", for in contrast to many other areas of the world where the church is engaged in mission activity, Europe has long considered itself to be "Christian", its culture is steeped in the Judeo-Christian heritage and its institutions and ideologies have been shaped by more than millenium old civilization where the church and Christian faith were dominant factors in all areas of life. This provides a completely different context for the presentation of the Gospel message.

Already in 1943 at least some French Roman Catholics were already considering their country as a mission field and attempting to apply the fruits of mission and missiological experience in far-away countries to their own situation (1). Today such an attitude no longer is met with astonishment. In 1985 John-Paul II wrote to the European bishops gathered for their 6th Symposium that the evangelization of Europe needs to be considered in completely new terms and at points spoke of "reevangelisation", "second evangelisation", or the "new age of the evangelisation of Europe" (2). According to Andrew Walls, "Western Europe has become a prime area, perhaps the prime area for identification as a mission field" (3). It would be easy to multiply the examples of this kind of statement.

It is not enough however to merely identify the problem. Out of the growing awareness that Western Europe is now a mission field follows the missiological task of understanding and analysing the situation so that appropriate responses may be found. The concept of "contextualization" so often mentioned in relation to mission in Third World countries needs to be applied as well to the reevangelization of Western Europe. How the Gospel is to be presented and lived needs to be consciously shaped by a multi-faceted context. In spite of, or perhaps even because of a centuries-old Christian heritage, traditional forms and language no longer seem to have any meaning. Ever since the "Enlightenment" posed new epistemological questions as well as because of the processes of industrialization, urbanization and "technicization", it seems difficult for many Europeans to think or believe that there is any reality other than material. Can the Gospel still communicate to the European mind at the end of the 20th century? For Lesslie Newbigin, this is a missiological question of utmost importance.

There is no higher priority for the research work of missiologists than to ask the question of what would be involved in a genuinely missionary encounter between the Gospel and ... modern Western culture (4).

Any missiological approach to modern Western culture, any attempt to contextualize the Gospel in European settings needs to address complex and difficult questions. Without claiming to be exhaustive, the following aspects and questions appear to be important in any consideration of the problem.
1) **The cultural context.** The overarching concept of "secularization" is often used to describe the present situation in Western Europe. For quite some time it was assumed by many that the modern era implied the end of religiosity (i.e. Bonhoeffer's "religionless Christianity" or Cox's "Secular City"). It is presently much less clear that "religion", no matter how one defines it, will disappear. What is needed is a serious "missiology of secularization", using the resources of sociology and other disciplines which have produced an abundant literature on the subject. While it is not possible or desirable to return to a "pre-secular" or pre-scientific mind-set or world-view, neither has secularization been the liberation process that some had thought it would be. Many questions stand in need of well thought out answers. What is secularization? How do we define religion? How do the two interact and affect our way of thinking, of doing theology? Can the Gospel be proclaimed solely in "secular" terms? Where are the real points of conflict between Christian faith and the modern world-view? How do we understand the return of religiosity in modern cultures, the interest in astrology and the occult as well various attempts to reinstate various forms of paganism? Is secularization a form of paganism or neo-paganism? No approach to evangelizing or reevangelizing in Europe can avoid these questions.

2) **The historical context.** While sociological and theological approaches will be necessary to grapple with the present cultural situation, many of the questions just mentioned cannot be dealt without taking into consideration the history of the "christianization" of Europe. Any attempt to "reevangelize" must take into account Europe's Christian past and this long and rich history has much to teach us. According to the well-known French historian Jean Delumeau,

... the christianization (of medieval Europe) was neither as extensive nor as profound as has been supposed. This means consequently that the present process of "dechristianization" is not as important as is ordinarily claimed (5).

Delumeau argues that the christianization of Europe was closely tied to political support structures and that Christianity often was no more than a thin veneer which covered-up or incorporated "pagan" institutions and mentalities. In other words, syncretism is nothing new in the history of the expansion of the Christian faith.

This is more than a theoretical debate for it sometimes appears that talk of re- evangelizing Europe is based on a nostalgic desire to regain the prestige and control that the church once held. Again according to Delumeau, the old "christendom" model came apart by itself, having engendered from within the elements of its own destruction. Without wanting to deny the many positive aspects of the European Christian heritage, it is still necessary to ask the following question. If the christendom (or "constantinian") model was self-destructive, what does that mean for efforts to reevangelize? What are the motivations for evangelization, what is the message and what kind of church is being looked for?

Perhaps the present situation of the churches in Europe is more positive than would appear at first glance. As Andrew Walls has written:

... the 20th century fading of territorial Christianity enables us to see better that recession is as much a part of Christian history as expansion, part of the vulnerability, perhaps, of the means God has ordained to make the human witness to Christ (6).

Vulnerability will perhaps be a difficult lesson to learn for those who have a long history of being in control. What role should this vulnerability and the lack of power