

Multiple religious affiliations and the future of Protestantism

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Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen,

First of all I would like to say 'thank you' for the invitation to come to Wittenberg and join your conference with the exciting title: Re-imagining Protestantism.

This title reminds me of a phrase of the famous Austrian composer Gustav Mahler on the question: what does tradition mean? He said: "Tradition is passing on the fire and not worshipping the ashes".

So, the question which arises is: do the people who carry this tradition still have enough breath to stir up the glow, which is still there? Because, let's face it: Churches today do not have the wind in their sails, but a cold wind blowing right into their faces.

'Re-imagining' in my view goes a step further than re-interpretation: The focus does not lie on the texts or narratives from the past, but on 'the signs of **our** time', and to do this in a creative and playful manner – using your imagination. Taking seriously, not only what can complete our heritage, but also what challenge it. Personally, I think the legacy of reformation is still very much alive. Its emphasis on freedom of conscience, the need to follow one's conscience, to stand up for one's convictions, based on the good life *for all* - not only for the rich but **for all** - exactly those things have regained importance for the younger generation. Taking leave of material enrichment and caring about the environment, seeking dialogue with people from other faiths and those who are not religious. I see it happening in the projects I am involved in - and about which I will tell you more in a few moments - that it is young people who honour the motto: sharing is caring! They are in need of people who say like Martin Luther "Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise!" In a way For many people today Martin Luther's addition: „So help me God, amen“ has become obsolete, but this could become the very spot where dialogue could start between believers and non-believers, between people of different faiths and the so called 'nones'.

Challenges

Individualisation, secularisation, globalisation and revolutionary technological innovations challenge us today. And the question is whether we can embrace these challenges or not. I am using the word 'embrace' on purpose, because it's not enough simply to refuse them.

But then the question is: What kind of images do we need today in our plural societies in order to sustain peace and build a sustainable future. And: How can we deal with religious and cultural diversity?

And this puts us right in the centre of my lecture. I would like to tell you about the projects we are doing at the Research Centre for Theology and Society of the Dutch Dominicans. Our mission is to connect theology and society. I would now like to tell you more about how we give shape to this mission.

Before showing you a trailer of what our internet project is about, I first would like to give a short impression about the context of the Netherlands.

I am living in a city, Amsterdam, capital of the Netherlands, which has been a majority-minority city since 2011. Officially, it belongs to the worldwide category super diverse cities. This means there is no ethnic group in the city anymore which makes up the majority. Forty-nine per cent of Amsterdam's inhabitants are native and fifty-one per cent have a migration background. This invites the question: into what should one integrate?¹ With so much diversity, conflicts cannot be avoided. However, it also means love relations will arise between people with different religious and cultural convictions. And often the children born from these relations will develop bi-cultural and bi-religious identities.

Who thinks, however, that migration is the only cause of the fast-paced societal changes in the Netherlands, is mistaken. An almost imperceptible revolution has occurred not only from the outside, but also within the country itself: a 'super-Christian' nation transformed into one of the most secularised countries of Europe in less than a century. While at the start of the twentieth century only two per cent of the Dutch was NOT a church member, today almost sixty-eight per cent of the population states they have no relation to a church.² Eight years ago, this was still sixty per cent. Each year, about seventy thousand people are leaving the church. According to the latest survey, in 2015 almost a quarter of the Dutch population was a church member. From these, about 11.7 [eleven point seven] per cent belonged to the catholic Church, whereas only 1.2 [one point two] would attend church on Sundays. For this reason, Church officials announced earlier this year that in the next fifteen years probably twelve hundred out of fifteen hundred Roman Catholic church buildings will be closed. The Protestant Churches are not faring much better. 8.6 [eight point six] per cent of the population belongs to the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN) and 4.2 [four point two] per cent count themselves as belonging to the so-called 'small Churches'.

Identities

Who would, seventy years ago, have thought that Christians would belong to a minority within Dutch society in 2016? It is clear: the situation of the Churches in the Netherlands is dramatic. It would be a wrong conclusion, however, to state that the need for religion or religiosity would not play a part any more in the post-Christian society that the Netherlands have become. The majority of the Dutch still call themselves 'believers' or 'spiritual'. The traditional theistic image of God with an almighty Father, who thrones above this world, has made way for non-personal immanent images of the Divine. What people believe is no longer unambiguous but ambiguous. A large part of the Dutch have become 'flexible believers' who no longer fit into traditional religious categories. Another representative survey among the Dutch population in 2014 shows that twenty-four per cent of the Dutch will combine elements from different religious traditions. A phenomenon, which is referred to from a theological perspective as 'multiple religious belonging'. Presently at VU University in Amsterdam a research project on the theme of multiple religious belonging is being conducted which inquires into the hybridisation of religiosity in the Netherlands. The percentage of 24% multiple religious believers, I mentioned before is derived from a

¹ Maurice Crul, e.a. (2013) *Superdiversiteit: een nieuwe visie op integratie*. Amsterdam:VU University Press.

² Ton Bernts, Joantine Berghuijs (2016) *God in Nederland 1966-2015*. Utrecht: Ten Have.

representative survey which is part of this research project. And this development is not restricted to the Netherlands.³

Here religious identity is no longer tied to a single religion. It is shifting, multiple, enriched by new religious experiences and insights. Here, plurality is not perceived as a threat to one's own identity, but as a wealth of creation and an enrichment of the meaning of life.

On the other hand the Dutch observe with trepidation Muslim solidarity and their sense of a religious 'we', feared because of the events of 9/11 and subsequent terrorist attacks like Paris and Brussels by Islamic extremists. Suddenly Dutch people realize that they themselves no longer have a comparable sense of common identity to counter it. What do we actually believe in, and are we still proud of our country and our own culture? These are frequently asked questions. In the demarcation from others - above all from Islam - there has been a recurrence of national feeling, a desire for a well-defined identity and pride in the achievements of Dutch history, which was laid down in a cultural canon that children have to learn in school.

This approach resulted in a politically inward-oriented gaze, which disregards the fact that the histories of many Dutch people originated elsewhere. They have their roots in Turkey, Greece, China, North and South America, Asia, Africa and so on.

There are Asian, African and oriental-looking young women and men in the Netherlands who, as soon as they open their mouth, exhibit an unmistakable local Amsterdam accent, as though their ancestors had never lived anywhere else than in the Jordan district, the heart of the old city of Amsterdam. They are migrant children who have grown up bi-culturally and/or bi-religiously and who are now, as the second or third generation of migrants, bearers of a hybrid identity. Their cultural and religious legacy will also determine the future of the Netherlands. And let's face it: One third of the citizens of the bigger cities in Europe have a migration background. In the very nearby future we will need a common culture, in which mutual differences are made fruitful.

In the past fifteen years the Dutch mentality towards dissenters has changed a lot. Three years after the events of 9/11, the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh was murdered in the streets of Amsterdam by a young radicalized Muslim, born and bred in the Netherlands. It was a big shock for the Dutch people, who were very proud of their open and tolerant society and their way of dealing with 'the other'. After this murder, fear of political Islam and fundamentalist Muslims increased and Dutch society became more closed and inward-oriented. Suddenly the Muslim neighbour became a possible 'enemy' and a growing gap developed between 'us' and 'them', with all the related tensions. It became very obvious that people did not know much about the religion of the other. Stereotypes of 'the Islam' as a monolithic and very static religious system set the tone, even in the serious press.

From unity to multiplicity

Europe today is facing the challenge of a paradigm shift, from a mindset of unity to a mindset of multiplicity. The nostalgic attempts to recreate a long-gone European culture of nation

³ Paul Zulehner (2008) Spirituelle Dynamik in säkularen Kulturen? Deutschland – Österreich – Schweiz. In: *Religionsmonitor 2008*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 152-154. Stefan Huber (2008) Analysen zur religiösen Praxis: Ein Blick in die Schweiz. In: *ibidem*, 163.

states, based on unity of language, territory and religion, will have to be replaced by a concept of culture integrating multiple identities.

The key for what is important in life and faith today lies in the experiences of people who live and survive in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. Multiplicity calls for communication. This means we have to intensify dialogue and forge connectedness where at present we still fearfully avoid one another. There is an urgent need to find answers to the problems and challenges for the common future of Europe, such as: how can we create a peaceful and just society that enables people to live together in a multi-ethnic Europe? How can prejudice against and fear of other faiths be dismantled without denying the problems that arise when people from different cultures and religions live together? How can we help ourselves and our society to benefit from the fruits of cultural and religious differences in order to guarantee *the good life for all*? These are the questions that lie at the heart of the project Nieuwwij.nl.

And to me, by the way, this 'good life for all' is in a way a secular translation of what we call in Christian terms *the kingdom of God*. So, as a theologian I am trying to find a broader language, more inviting words for a mixed religious, spiritual and/or humanist audience, to work together on what I think the message of Jesus is about: namely 'doing justice to God's creation and looking after each other with passion and compassion.'

I would like to give an impression of our project with a small trailer. We try to invite people to think and communicate about this 'good life of all'.

Project We

In December 2008 the Research Centre for Theology and Society of the Dutch Dominicans – I am the director of this centre - founded this internet platform on interreligious and intercultural communication with the support of the Dutch Ministry of Housing, Planning and Environment (VROM). Today, Nieuwwij.nl is the largest digital platform in the field of interreligious dialogue in the Netherlands, with an average of eighty thousand visitors per month. And because we are not commercial we can give all our content also to other media and they spread it too. And of course we use the social media.

Let's have a look at the trailer: https://youtu.be/RfC_iKG5y20

Project *We* uses the slogan *Let's connect the differences* and allows (young) people with different cultural and religious backgrounds to work together. The philosophy behind this slogan is that differences must be faced before something new can be built together. Accepting diversity means learning to think 'in plural'. This is particularly difficult to the western mind set, which is based on binary and unifying concepts. After all, not only the concept of culture of the modern age is modelled after the idea of (national) unity. In Christianity, as well, unity is a central notion. 'We are all one in Jesus Christ', Paul states in order to strengthen the cohesive powers of the first Christian communities. But in the name of that same unity, those who had a different interpretation of faith than those in power in the Church were declared heretics. Unity is not only a unifying concept, but often also a violent one. The question is, however: can a community be based on diversity? Is it possible not to put 'truths' in the forefront as a unifying element, but instead embark on a common

search? Is a truth thinkable, which arises through or in encounter and provides room for people with multiple or other religious identities?

Project *We* is not in the first place about giving answers but rather about asking questions. It aims at picturing the creativity and energy of people in the neighbourhoods of towns and villages and stimulating their ability to find their own solutions, making new common initiatives possible on a small scale. The project wants to stimulate people to take their responsibility and to show their strength instead of assuming the part of the victim. The 'Generation Y' video team, for instance, records projects and people who are still working on this 'new we', making them accessible to a wider Dutch-speaking audience. Besides virtual connections the website also features real live interfaith encounters. One of the most successful activities is a weekend in which Muslims and Christians are staying together in a monastery. The aim is getting to know each other better, building friendships and understanding the religious values in each other's lives. Much of the material is also used in schools and other multicultural meetings, as well as in lectures about 'a new we in your neighbourhood'.

Without denying that living amid all those differences entails problems, project *We* focuses on the positive developments in an increasingly plural country. By doing this, *We* wants to motivate people to work on shaping their own lives and society in a constructive and creative way - for words and images are not innocent. They are not only a reflection of reality, but also creating reality themselves.

Instead of fostering fear and cynicism, project *We* wants to promote the development of a common culture, in which mutual differences are made fruitful through participation. The right to 'be different' is an achievement within liberal democracy. The struggle about the question which values should be defining society is part of this democratic process. The debate on this question, in my view, must not be seen as a problem but as a privilege. In an open society which strives for individual emancipation as a human right, there will always be conflicts of interests. The common ground is that people comply with the law, with the rules that are laid down in the Constitution.

Connecting differences

As long as diversity is associated with loss of identity and relativism of values, and the convictions of 'the other' are seen as a threat to one's own identity, there will be no room for a new *We*. Mutual acceptance and equality, while retaining and respecting the differences, are indispensable ingredients for the development of new sustainable connections. This is why we chose the motto '*We* - connects the differences'. It underlines the necessity not to downplay differences in favour of commonalities in the search for mutual connections. *We* advocates facing the differences and making them fruitful - moving away from the *either/or* thinking and searching beyond prejudices with an open mind for a *both/and* approach.

The important questions of this moment are: How can we conquer fear of the other? How can we connect without having to become the same? What is at stake is not the search for a new big *We*, but rather the existence - side by side and mingled - of small 'we's', dependent on mutual communication and making connections.

Breaking down prejudice by encounters, promoting knowledge about and providing inspiration from the various religious traditions, and stimulating communication about them with a view to creating a peaceful and just society: this is what project *We* aims at. It is the longing for new ways of connectedness by learning how to understand differences as an enriching part of life, learning to see the world through the eyes of the other.

To me as a Christian theologian, believing with Jesus in the kingdom of God, it is very clear that if we want to take the signs of the times seriously and seek for 'the good life for all' amid the messiness of our daily life, we must give room to multiplicity. Multiplicity not only in one's own Christian circle - no matter how important and relevant this may be - but in particular in the sense of giving room to the voices of the religious and spiritual strangers in our midst.

Theology on the marketplace

Today, doing theology means going to the virtual marketplace, where people meet each other in very different ways, playing with identities, narratives, imagination and desires and where God can be found in many spiritual guises. The game of theology has changed. The non-religious and the religious other become a *locus theologicus*. Which has as its consequence that the slogan 'unity in diversity' should be replaced by 'diversity in search of connections', searching for a new *We/a new us*. Or, better, searching for small *We's* which are able to connect in a network which does not cherish the desire for becoming the same, but can make a difference by building a society in which everyone can feel at home.

Whoever thinks that this is a utopian and naive idealism, is mistaken. It is the reality of the twenty-first century. The century in which the neo-liberal market thinking within a nation state - and the related excesses of egocentric wealth accumulation at the expense of both the majority of humankind and the earth's natural resources - is running on empty.

How about God's reign?

Perhaps you noticed that I didn't use much religious or Christian theological language until now. I did not because I think we don't have to do so if we want to enter into dialogue within the western European context with people from different religious and non-religious backgrounds. But I can use this language too, if you want me to do so:

So in Christian theological language this means:

To become living witnesses to the coming reign of God as Christians, we have to re-envision the life-giving aspects in the mission of Jesus and in our Christian traditions. We need a life-affirming and dynamic spirituality of new and just connections on a local and global scale. A spirituality of the fullness of life is an urgent necessity within the plurality and complexity of today's world, where we encounter people of many different faiths, ideologies, and convictions. Therefore, as Christians, we need to acknowledge that there is inherent value and wisdom in the diversity of life-giving spiritualities.

God's Spirit can be found in all cultures and religions that affirm life. This is why we need the spirit of dialogue, with the attitude of respect and friendship - not only among Christians but also with people of other religions and worldviews.

So the questions are: What does a church look like that embraces the diversity of God's creation, a church that seeks for truth in mutual encounter and gives room to people with hybrid religious identities; a church that flings the doors and windows wide open and allows the light of the kingdom of God to come in? A church that is able to establish new connections between people who want to work for the common good, whatever their religious background or worldview may be? Is this a bridge too far for a church that wants to bring the good news of Jesus Christ for all humankind? Or is this exactly the bridge the churches have to build, if it wants to face the signs of the times? Ultimately, we need a dialogical prophetic way; a Christian identity, which is stimulated by the stories of Jesus and which is transformed constantly by life itself - an ever-changing identity and an eschatological truth, which need to be grounded in an ongoing encounter and dialogue between people. This encounter is not about finding similarities in the first place, but about appreciating differences and making them fruitful in the midst of daily life.

I hope, by using new communication technology we can make a contribution to knowledge, respect and cooperation between people from different life-giving wisdom traditions. Our aim is to enable them to find a better understanding of each other by crossing cultural and religious boundaries and work together for a world where the fullness of life is available to all.

Concluding remarks

Let me confess that, as a Lutheran theologian born and bred in Germany, often in my life I remembered the words of Martin Luther at the Reichstag in Worms in front of all those powerful people, even the emperor. Imagining this man, standing there and speaking that words, was a powerful image to me. He empowered me when I needed the courage and the strength to do things that were not so common in the eyes of the powerful. Because of the *imago dei* of every human being, it doesn't matter whether he or she is successfully in life or not – there is a merciful God – some prefer to call it power in life - which wants love and not hate, peace and not war and where you can find shelter and feel at home when a cold and nasty wind blows right into your face.

The courage to go your own way, to learn from your own mistakes and those of your religious tradition and 'den Leuten auf's Maul zu schauen' (i.e. listen to the people) to find the good life for all, knowing that the capacity to do, is 'lauter Gnade', purely the grace of God, is something that gives you a kind of freedom, what grants you happiness.

So, I am a happy Lutheran theologian who uses some elements from a Dominican tradition and inspiring insights of other religious and non-religious traditions of wisdom. I do so in order to find 'the good life of all' - what our Jewish brothers and sisters and the first followers of Jesus called the land of milk and honey, the Kingdom of God. At this moment I am teaching a course together with my Jewish colleague from Israel Ephraim Meir, at the university of Hamburg on 'Theology of the good life for all from a transreligious perspective'. Other colleagues at the Academy of World religions – a Buddhist, a Muslim, a Hindu, will also

make a contribution to our seminar from their own religious tradition to this theme. It's a theological enterprise. It's a way of building relationships between people on a societal and a theological level. We need to find to find a 'new we', not one big one like a new religious institute but small new we's which are in dialogue with each other, realising common goals and making differences fruitful. And very important: celebrating the variety in life as a gift of a compassionate God.

Thank you very much for your attention.