

„A change in thinking“ Mission in times of forced secularity

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1. Considering a in his opinion deadlocked metaphysics, Immanuel Kant demanded a “change in the way of thinking” (KrV B xvi). He compared this with the revolutionary solution of Copernicus. Copernicus had proposed to change places: to make a stop-motion from the heavenly movements and turn the fixed earth into a moving observer. Perhaps we the church are invited to such a Copernican turn if we consider the low missionary success in secularized Western Europe, in the current “disaster area for the churches” (Peter L. Berger). For example, with Paul the Christians understand “justification” as the justification of the sinner before God. Since the earthquake of Lisbon in 1755, the conditions have changed: God is now the one who has to justify himself before man. The question of theodicy, which is difficult to answer, and which is repeatedly posed to us by our atheist brothers and sisters, is such a Copernican turn. Or: Pope Francis asked the Church to go to the margins of society. It would have to be considered whether these margins are the centre, since Christ is found with the least (Matthew 25:40). Accordingly, it is the church that is standing aside at the edge then.

How could a Copernican turn look like with regard to mission? Mission is understood by many as a kind of magnetism (“invoking Christians”). But from the word it is actually centrifugal (“sending”) – dynamically creative, stimulating and exciting. All this is not new to you. However, in this sense “reversed”, mission should appear searching, in the sense of exploratory (Acts 17: 17-22). In English literature, a pedagogical principle is often quoted: “To teach John Latin, it is not enough to know Latin; you have also to know John.” Does Christian mission really knows her secular “John”? Is she curious about him?

2. I grew up in this city, which means that I was socialised in a “twin diaspora”. This extends right into my family constellation. Two of my grandparents were Protestant, but before the Second World War had left church. My father was baptized but not confirmed. My other grandmother came from a sincere Protestant family, who was horrified because she married a Catholic, my grandfather. “Twin diaspora” means: to be part of a Catholic minority in the midst of a Protestant-shaped environment, which, however, in East Germany again forms a Christian minority in the predominantly atheistic - or rather, religious indifferent - environment. This secular situation has to be called “forced” because there are two tendencies in this region: first, the cultural secularisation of Western Europe with all well-known consequences; second, the political secularisation pursued by the Soviet Union in its satellite states. The latter consisted of a strategy of exclusion or even persecution of Christians and Churches. (As an active Catholic I was therefore not able to attend secondary school, but had to achieve my education by way of detours.) This strategy followed seamlessly the anti-church spirit of National Socialism up to 1945. Added to this was an atheist propaganda, which continued the church struggle of the German Social Democracy of the nineteenth century. Even today, the young people in this region mostly carry out the “rite de passage” to the adult age through the secular youth consecration (“Jugendweihe”) dating from the 19th century rather than the protestant or roman-catholic confirmation. The consequences of this forced secularity are profound, because they have grown throughout several generations. In many local families, the last persons baptized – but not any longer confirmed – are the grandparents. It is a kind of “people’s atheism”: being without any confession is completely normal, and you don’t have to make a decision to become like this. Just as it is normal in other places for people to be Catholic, Protestant, Reformed or Muslim.

All statistics show that East Germany - together with Bohemia - is a worldwide exception. Never before in its entire 2000-year history the Christian message has reached such a large-scale secularized environment, which encompasses both cities and rural areas. Rather it has always encountered some form of religion. After 1989, this exceptional situation was not known to most of the missionary activities that started here: their well-intentioned efforts encountered much more a surprise rather than a rejection, and so they were running low. Two missionaries of the Mormons were said to have hugged a Protestant street worker in the middle of the street because he was the first to understand what they were talking about.

3. So again, does the Christian mission really know her secular "John"? Is she curious about him? The question of God ("Gottesfrage") is so irrelevant for this "John" that he can hardly be described as an atheist. You can rather call him an "agnostics", a person "without confession" (with Linda Woodhead: "Nones") or a "religious indifferent" person. He would probably call himself "humanist" or "religion-free" - if such differences are relevant to him at all. He is surprised about those who still need a God for their way of life, because he himself demonstrates that one can live decent and socially committed without God and existential crises. (Actually, how does he do it? Obviously distress does not teach him to pray, as it is put in German "Not lehrt beten".) Already I mentioned the secular youth consecration, and there is more: secular wedding ceremonies and secular funerals. So why religion? Why Christianity? "John" knows, that there is such a thing, because it is in the daily news. But even existentially it does not affect him at all - compared to young people, that feel not attracted by an advertisement for stair lifts.

4. Anyone who becomes a missionary in unknown and confusing landscapes depends on scouts who search and find the paths. You can name roughly three groups: As in the case of special care, the first are the people sent by the church herself - into the hospitals, prisons, military compounds, and the other fields of mission. They are more or less equipped with appropriate competences to propose the faith ("Proposer la foi"), as the French bishops aptly formulated in 1996. If "something is gained from it for the Church", it is so to say not her own merit, but caused by God. "You received without payment; give without payment." (Matthew 10:8) - Copernican turn here is to put the question of authenticity: "Will we also do this type of mission if we don't gain anything from it?" The so-called normal congregational counselling then mainly serves as preparing those who are sent along the way. Like it is used in the closing formula of every Catholic Eucharistic celebration: *Ite, missa est*. Either they are to follow the scouts who are already on their way in the diverse milieus and problem zones of our pluralistic society. Or they are to become the first ones to penetrate the previously inaccessible terra incognita.

5. Now, for these territories, which are still - or are again - closed to the church, the second group is important. These are the scouts that left the church without a specific church call to mission, i.e. those who have left the church or are "distant" members. Are they perhaps under a hidden command of the Holy Spirit, obeying the voice of their conscience, following the pressure of circumstances, seeking an alternative life-path? These people are more or less socialized in church - they attended religious lessons at school, they received the sacraments - even though this "past" or "history" sometimes appears to them as a heavy backpack, which they would most willingly discard. Like what Teresa of Avila, contemporary of the Reformation, has envisaged "Even if someone leaves the path again after he has begun to set out on it, he will have gained so much light in the short distance he travelled that he would be better off in his future life. [...] For the real good can never do anything bad." (Cf. Way of Perfection, 20) - So don't you think that also these people might have been sent: for and together with HIM, the great unknown and often not visible ONE, accompanying them (Lk 24:16)?

In any case, the Scouts of the second group often settle in those regions where many of the first group are no longer or not yet accepted because they speak "churchy language" difficult to understand - or even more drastically termed in a roman-catholic way: because they still smell too much of incense. However, these scouts are actually at home in these landscapes; moreover, they are accepted. Even just a few of these sown and spread out people make up for the many fruitless attempts of the church to regain influence, if they - "contaminated" by the gospel, and so to speak "undercover" - bear fruits (Luke 8:8; 10:1). - The church must also keep in touch with these scouts and must not write them off. Rather she has to retrieve their knowledge, provide them with maps showing the paths and dead ends and obstacles. The church should retrieve their reports about incomprehensible customs and difficult-to-understand thoughts and minds (1 Thess 5:21). It is probably not "the church" as such that is to accompany them, but individual companions who do not spoon-feed but encourage and strengthen them, and also carefully and sensitively draw attention to possible dangers. Maybe these scouts return to church - most probably they won't. Sent without homecoming, they illustrate an important biblical aspect of vocation: Abraham, Moses, Peter, Paul ..., no one returned to his starting point, indeed none was even allowed to (Gen 24:8b). Like the seeds don't return, which the

sower hurls out. (Actually, the grains remaining in the bag have the impression: "They are gone, and we become less and less!") However, when time has come church must follow them (Acts 18:10b).

6. Finally, the church will be well advised to get "informed" by the scouts who as "John" approaches her from outer space, like "the other", deriving from their own areas of experience, of culture and of ways of life. Whether they come open-minded or unfavourably or even hostile, one should not be irritated. Isn't it not, that especially the foreign prophets helped the church discover herself? Remember how the questions of ecology/environmental issues and of human rights were confronting the church. In particular, with regard to the current discourse insinuating deficits regarding a-theists and non-believers (aren't the words themselves somehow traitorous?), an exchange of positions should be considered: What do they tell us - and HE through them - that we cannot know without them? This calls for a Copernican turn in the missionary practice, which hitherto is based on the experiences of the inner-Christian ecumenism ("ecumenism of the first kind") and incorporates insights from the interreligious dialogue ("ecumenism of the second kind"). We need an ecumenism of the third kind.

To develop this model this is not the moment. But if you have studied the ways and detours of the past centuries in the "ecumenism of the first kind" between the Christian churches, you will understand what I mean: It is not a matter of drawing the other over to one's own side. But altogether we have to find a way into a constellation which is under eschatological reservation. What I want to say is that the "final answers" do not lie with the counterparties/adversaries. We may call it the "kingdom of God". Philosophers may say: "Veritas semper maior" (cf 1 Cor 13:9). Of course, there is nothing against people's conversion and that they may be baptized. However, the primary objective is different: We need all the powers and abilities of all Christian and non-Christian traditions and of all life options, be they atheistic or religiously indifferent, in order to make the one body of Christ with its completely different limbs become real (1 Cor 12:12-30). Thus, in HIM and with HIM, we continue HIS mission, the mission of the Father, into our world and time. This is the true mission. Christians are the salt, the spice, which dissolves and through this fulfils its task.

7. In the end, let me give three examples of such an "ecumenism of the third kind". I limit myself to the liturgical sphere, which is always problematic in the ecumenism of every kind: As you know, the Peace Prayers have led to the 1989 Peaceful Revolution in this city. These Peace Prayers had indeed been ecumenical worships with atheists and religious indifferent people. Remember: These worship had been celebrated with them, not for them; they had been arranged and formed together with them. In a toilsome process, figures were found in which all who participated felt at home. And these are the results: No increase in the number of baptism! But the bloodless end of a despising regime. - A second example: Not far from here is the Anatomy section of the Medical Faculty. A professor suggested that those who had made their bodies available should receive a dignifying commemoration/funeral ceremony, and that their relatives should be invited to participate. Most of the students and relatives were non-Christians, and yet an appropriate form for this celebration was found. By now, this kind of commemoration is practiced in many medical faculties. - A final example: After the amok run at the Gutenberg Gymnasium in Erfurt in April 2012, a memorial celebration took place on the central square. Tens of thousands took leave of the victims. The Gymnasium was a communal institution, not a church school. Yet, a form could be found that satisfied everyone, whatever they believed or not. My theological faculty in Erfurt has started a research project exploring the potential of this and other "disaster liturgies".

This is achieved when the different competences and traditions, when the various charisms join; when there is mutual respect; and, above all, when there is a readiness to change oneself. Not only the others, everybody including ourselves have to move. One might call it a Copernican turn, or as well: meta-noia, thinking-beyond (Mk 1,15) – a "change in thinking".