IAMS

Study groups

Mission in the context of secularisation and a post-modern culture

The group numbered fourteen people from eleven different nationalities! During the first session, the group decided which issues it wished to focus on. It identified four major areas that it would address: secularisation; post-modernity; the effects of both on the Christian faith and community, and the mission response. In the case of the first two, the group did not think it possible to present a clear, uncontested definition of either secularisation or post-modernity. Rather, it believed that the best way of understanding the reality, which the two terms represent, is through a mapping exercise, in which the main contours are set out, always leaving room for further discernment.

Secularisation Theories

With this in mind, Andrew Kirk presented the main current theories concerning the origin and significance of secularisation. He identified six possible explanations.

1.   *The General Thesis*
The process of disassociation of the European population from institutional religion has happened gradually since the second half of the 18th century. As a result, society has lost the sense of a 'sacred canopy' (Peter Berger), an overarching understanding of the universe and the meaning of human life as created and sustained by a caring, infinite, personal God. Parallel to this, it has also lost the rhythm of the Christian year, with its major festivals celebrating the history of salvation. The process began at the time of the Enlightenment. It has both an intellectual and a social dimension. First, God is no longer at the centre of most people's lives as a being necessary to explain reality. As knowledge of the universe has expanded through the progress of the sciences, God has shrunk; as a 'God-of-the-gaps,' like the Cheshire cat (*Alice in Wonderland*), God has gradually disappeared, until only the smile of comfort in times of crisis is left. Secondly, identification with the Church is no longer necessary for social acceptance and advancement. Indeed, Christian commitment could be seen as a hindrance to social approval in a number of situations.

2.   *Loss of Memory Thesis*
Gradually, with the exchange of other activities for regular attendance at Church and with the diminution of Christian instruction in public education, whole populations have become largely ignorant of the Christian faith. They have forgotten both the story and its meaning. There are no longer sufficient people and opportunities to transmit the faith to the next generation. The majority of people appear to be able to manage their lives without recourse to the Christian world-view. What is forgotten is no longer seen as relevant to contemporary needs; it belongs to the past.

3. *Freedom for Women Thesis*

This is a variation on the last two theories. It disagrees with the General Thesis in believing that the exodus from the institutions of the Church happened suddenly and rapidly during the 1960s. Statistics seem to show that Church attendance was never higher than during the first 15 years after the end of the second world-war, comparing favourably with the 19th century. However, it declined dramatically over just a few years. The explanation is surprising: owing to the changing role of women in society, both in the work-place and in reproduction, women had considerably less time, or inclination, to transmit the faith to the next generation. Secularisation was due to an expanding economy and the discovery of the contraceptive pill!

4. Believing without Belonging

Although secularisation may be characterised by a formal loss of Church membership and attendance, it cannot be equated necessarily with a loss of faith. Statistically, belief in God is still high over the populations of Europe. A new phenomenon has attracted the interest of sociologists of religion – 'vicarious religion.' The majority of people still feel the need for religious practices to be carried out, seeing them as, in some way, being performed on their behalf. To gain benefit from religion, it is not necessary to be present at the rites, only to live in a community where they happen on a regular basis.

5. *End of Christendom*

Secularisation is characterised, first and foremost, by the formal (or informal) separation of the state and the church. The public recognition and statutory privileges of the church have come to an end. A secular state is one in which the organs of government can no longer consider any one religion to be specially supported. The state has to recognise the equal validity and rights of many religions. Secularisation is defined essentially as pluralisation.

6. *The Lack of Entrepreneurship*

Secularisation in the sense of the decline of commitment to Christian institutions is largely due to the failure of the churches to make their structures, message and activities sufficiently relevant to the modern generation. The churches have become stuck in an unfortunate time-warp, which includes hostility to the use of modern methods of promotion, such as branding. This view helps to account for the quite different experience of modernity in Europe and the USA.

Following the presentation the group expanded further on the meaning of secularisation. It was said that secularisation is a process of cultural control, which employs secularism as an ideology to justify it. The ideology is positivism, which assumes that the explanation for life and historical processes is intra-mundane and that the testable and demonstrated results of science are the only sure form of knowledge. The origin of secularism can be found in late medieval humanism, a child of the Judeo-Christian system of belief, when it began to give more emphasis to the rational than to the spiritual dimensions of life. It is an apocalyptic 'religion' claiming to be able to bring Paradise from heaven to earth, from the future to the present. Now, unlike at the beginning of the Church, Christianity is challenged by one of its own children. Mission depends on the Church neither ignoring nor underestimating the significance of the alternative being offered.

Understanding Post-modernity

The complementary part of the mapping exercise involved revisiting the much debated question of the post-modern. Michael Rynkiewich offered a short explanation. He reminded the group that, in broad terms, we can identify three major phases in the history of Western culture: the pre-modern, modern and post-modern. In the pre-modern world, God is at the centre of the universe and all human life. The Christian Scripture is the undisputed authority for belief and moral action. Truth is understood as whatever is objectively real in a given, created universe. God is monotheistic and reigns in a hierarchically structured order. In the modern world, the human self becomes the reference point for knowledge. It was pointed out that Descartes was asked by the Catholic church to find an indubitable basis for knowledge in the midst of increasing uncertainties about external authorities. The consequence of Descartes famous process of self-reflection (the *cogito*) was to create a dualism between the self-enclosed subject and an external world. God was pushed to the limits of the world as the guarantor that human rational procedures were not delusory. Later Kant also tried to find a place for God, in terms of being the guarantee that a universal moral order was credible and effective. In the post-modern world, there is no centre and no single authority. The issue is no longer *ontology* – what ultimately exists – nor *epistemology* – how do we know that we know – but *hermeneutics* – how do we interpret texts in the light of the fact that all human life is constructed to fulfill human desire.

The beginning of the systematic study of culture coincided with the time in which Kant lived. The distinction, which he made, between the *phenomena* of the world, which are only accessible to the human mind by means of categories, which it uses to process them, and the things in themselves (*noumena*), which are intrinsically unknowable, has been carried over into the social sciences. Anthropology as a discipline began in the USA in 1882 (in Europe it was called ethnology). In the 1920s, parallels began to be drawn between anthropology and the most current theories in physics, such as the uncertainty principle and relativity. This led to a stress on cultural relativity: different peoples live in quite separate worlds, in which interpretative categories do not overlap; one can only assess and evaluate cultures, other than one's own, by criteria internal to that culture. The observer cannot adopt a neutral space outside the culture to interpret it objectively. All cultures are contingent, constructed, contested and continually changing. If human people are at the centre of investigation and interpretation then patterns of relationships become the key to understanding. However, there is no normative way of judging these patterns, as they vary from culture to culture.

Parush Parushev continued the discussion of post-modernity with his own explanation. The roots and birth of post-modernity are related intimately to the intellectual development of the West, beginning in the late medieval period. Modernity was born in the turn to self as the thinking subject and measure of what is acceptable as true. Epistemology replaced ontology as the starting-point for making sense of the world. The post-modern turn itself can be dated to the posthumous publication of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). In this work, the philosopher presented a fundamental paradigm shift in understanding the role of language. In contrast to his earlier view (published in the *Tractatus* (1921)), language is used to express the way humans think, rather than to depict the reality around us.

Since the Renaissance, two ways of living have co-existed: the acceptance of a hierarchical society governed by a supreme authority (instituted either by God or by processes intrinsic to history) and the acceptance of the supreme dignity and autonomy of the individual in the romantic movements of humanism as a challenge to the old order. The Reformation began the critical questioning of an authority hitherto universally taken for granted. Descartes

tried to restore confidence in truth by finding an incontestable foundation, ultimately immune to the most severe doubt. Within modernity two trajectories have existed side by side: one religious, spiritual, romantic and playful; the other sceptical, rational and serious. In post-modernity the first has finally overtaken the second. The 'post' in post-modernity can mean either 'against' or 'after'. In the former case whatever claims to be universal, timeless and defined in an unambiguous form is negated. Post-modernity is pessimistic about acquiring knowledge; it refutes all kinds of foundationalism. Its epistemology is 'holism' (coherentism), which allows limited knowledge within a particular tradition, probably incommensurable with knowledge gleaned from other traditions. It emphasises the fragility, relativity and plurality of knowledge against the striving after certainty, characteristic of modernity.

Post-modernity has been interpreted in both a negative and positive light. Negatively, Terry Eagleton, for example, accuses the post-modern condition of blurring boundaries, and therefore having nothing substantial or coherent to say about the crucial moral dilemmas of the time. Everything is a matter of aesthetics; truth is in the eye of the beholder. There is no way of judging between different appreciations of life as art. Positively, philosopher-theologians, like Nancey Murphy, believe that the sharp critique of the pretensions of the modern project open up ways of escaping from the false dualisms engendered by a radical subject-object split. The enclosed and solipsistic understanding of reality, typical of modernity, is called into question. New depths of human experience can be explored.

Mission in a Post-modern environment

Timothy Yates helped the group to reflect on some of the key aspects of the church's life and calling, necessary if it is to witness faithfully to a post-modern generation. It should re-evaluate what it means to be an agent of God's universal reign as Lord of the universe, and what is universal about the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Man. There are abiding principles that denote an authentic witness to the Gospel (Bosch): justice as fairness; unity over against the tragedy of contemporary social fragmentation of life and the sin of ecclesial disunity; reconciliation within the many conflicts caused by multiple crises of identity (personal and communal). The local congregation is crucial – Joe Oldham said that only the local is real. At the same time, the catholicity of the church has to be maintained, in order to demonstrate the reconciling power of Jesus Christ. In the church's life of worship, the eschatological dimension of salvation needs to be emphasised because we live in a society of despair (Moltmann). There has to be a thorough and informed commitment to sustaining the renewing powers of the planet and a prophetic witness against exploitation due to materialistic greed. The church needs to demonstrate in every practical way possible that it believes in the indispensable ministry of women in all aspects of its life.

He underlined the fact that in Europe increasingly the territorial approach to ministry is breaking down. The local church is no longer synonymous with parish boundaries. Though the parish still occupies a place within a structure of dioceses, where the bishop still has an important role as the focus of the church's unity, the church will grow (numerically and in the depth of its discipleship) through forming smaller networking communities, such as cell churches.

Michael Rynkiewich shared with the group principles for reaching and engaging post-modern people with the Gospel. They all involve the Christian community in building relationships of trust, consistent Christian living, hospitality, diversity of membership and expressions of worship, involvement in local projects, space for listening, a genuine sharing of hopes and fears and freedom to belong before believing. The key to effective mission in a post-modern setting is the witness of an authentic fellowship, which is especially open to broken, damaged, vulnerable people. It will be one whose chief goal is progressively to lessen

the gap between the announcement of the good news of Jesus Christ, the promise of the restoration of full humanity in him and the life of discipleship.

The group then shared stories of new initiatives in living and sharing the Gospel. It debated the merits and disadvantages of building communities of people sharing similar backgrounds and interests, deciding that such methods were legitimate as long as they did not become ends in themselves. Homogeneous groups must be effectively related to the wider Christian community. All agreed on the importance of a non-authoritarian, non-hierarchical style of leadership: one which served the interests of the Gospel and the people in compassionate solidarity. The notion of 'covenantal discipleship' was mentioned, i.e. the commitment of small groups of people to one another, to be held accountable both in their personal lives and employment to a faithful witness to God's kingdom. Finally, the calling of the Church to go and be wherever people congregate, rather than expect them to come to Christian meetings, was highlighted. The chief end of life in the Church is to equip Christ's disciples to live in the world as true witnesses.

The Future

The group committed itself to sharing resources on the topic of mission in a secular and post-modern context, such as stories, bibliographies, training programmes, theological and missiological curriculae. One member of the group agreed to act as a clearing centre for the exchange of information.

J. Andrew Kirk