

Religion in plain view

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In December 2008 the Study Centre for Theology and Society of the Dutch Dominicans founded an Internet platform on interreligious and intercultural communication with the support of the Dutch Ministry of Housing, Planning and Environment (VROM). Five and a half years later this site has become one of the most visited sites in the field of religion, spirituality and interreligious dialogue in the Netherlands, with an average of 30,000 unique visitors a month. The website was part of a multidisciplinary research project “Searching for a new we in the Netherlands” of the Dominican Study Centre, where we reflect on social reality from a theological point of view.

How to find social cohesion in a highly individualised and at the same time multicultural and multi-religious society? How can we help to create a peaceful and just society that allows for people to live together in a multi-ethnic Europe? How can prejudice and fear projected towards people with other faiths and cultural backgrounds be dismantled without denying the problems that arise when people from different cultures and religions live together? How can we help our society to benefit from the fruits of cultural and religious differences in order to create the good life for all?

To me this “good life for all” is 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

Gods creation and looking after each other with passion and compassion.”

But before showing you what our answer to these questions looks like and how we try to invite people to think and communicate about this “good life of all”, I first would like to elaborate on the social context of the Netherlands, because the New-We-project is based on an analysis of the Dutch context. Some countries in Europe will have similar political and religious challenges, but of course there is also a great diversity within Europe. So what I will present is not a ready-made Dutch export product for Europe – every country will need its own new-we-concepts – but perhaps some insights will suit your own country. And let’s face it, creating a new-we-movement does not only require a transformation of a “we” which excludes people, it also needs a new “I”.

But it is not only a large number of Dutch citizens who do not want to be part of a religious community in the classical sense anymore. This trend can be seen all over Europe today. In general, Europeans do not want to represent a religious group anymore. They prefer to represent just themselves, or perhaps two or three others around them.

On the other hand the Dutch observe with trepidation Muslim solidarity and their sense of a religious “we”, frightened because of the events of 9/11 and subsequent terrorist attacks by Islamic extremists. Suddenly Dutch people realize that they 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 “proud to be Dutch” 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. Their cultural

and religious legacy will also determine the future of the Netherlands. There are 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 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. One third of the citizens of the bigger cities in Europe have a migration background. In the very near future we will need a common culture, in which mutual differences are made fruitful.

The right to “be different” is an achievement within liberal democracy. The struggle about the question which values – probably which religious values – should define 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, for 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.

Let's connect the differences

Of course, there is much more to say about the Dutch context but let's go back to the New-We project now a trailer for which can be found here: <http://www.nieuwwij.nl/index.php?pageID=26>

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, it is not only the concept of culture in the modern age that is modelled on 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 peaceful concept, but often also a violent one. But can a community be based on diversity? Is it possible not to put “truths” at the forefront as a unifying element, but instead to 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 about giving answers in the first place but 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 assume responsibility and to show their strength instead of taking the part of the victim.

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”.

Developing a common culture

Without denying that living amid all those differences entails problems, project *We* focuses on the positive developments in an increasingly pluralist 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. 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 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 either/or thinking and searching beyond prejudices with an open mind for an and/and approach.

The important questions of the 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 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, because you learn to see reality through the eyes of the other.

To me it is very clear that if I want to take the signs of the times seriously and seek "the good life for all" amid the messiness of our daily life, I must make room for 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 making room for the voices of the religious and spiritual stranger in our midst.

The burning question is: Will I allow this? Will I allow that this other interrupts my own narrative and disrupts my peace? That he or she exposes the assumptions in my thinking and acting, and questions my complacency? Do I have the courage to have my own limited view on the world expanded, meaning I may have to face things I would rather not see? In short: do I make

the other into an alter ego, into the projection of my own desires or do I sustain the opaque singularity of every human being?

Together with Emmanuel Levinas I would plead for the latter: no practice of "egology", not determining the other from my own ego and reducing him or her to myself, but letting myself be surprised by the opacity of the other. For the Heidelberg theologian and missiologist Theo Sundermeier, who lived and worked in Africa for many years and who is an expert in the field of intercultural communication, wonder is the beginning of all hermeneutics. He writes:

"In wonder, I am open for the little, the humble, and in this I discover otherness, beauty, multiplicity. He who is surprised, is capable of endure dissonance with resignation and will not look for harmony too easily. For the dissonant, as well, belongs to the fullness of life."¹

Diversity in search of connections

Today, to me 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 other becomes a *locus theologicus*. As a consequence the slogan "unity in diversity" should be replaced by "diversity in search of connections", searching for a new We. Or, better, searching for small We's which are able to connect in a network which does not cherish the desire for fusion 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. Creating social cohesion needs new and just connections on a local and global scale.

My answer to the question: "Does religion

in a pluralist society belong behind the front door or in plain sight?”, would be: We need the separation of religion and state, but this does not mean that religious people are forced to become schizophrenic – because they have to leave their personal religious inspiration for living their life behind the front door. There must be room in public space for non-religious and religious answers to questions on the meaning of life.

In spite of the secular prediction that religion will disappear, religion is still an important power in the lives of people – even in the secularized countries of Europe. We cannot deny that. So I would like to say to everybody who is engaged in religion and public life: Be aware of the images and words you are using about religion(s), because words and images not only reflect a reality, they also create a reality.

I think theologians who are engaged in public theology and journalists who report on the manifestations of religion can be bridge-builders and can help promote the positive forces of religion without denying that religion has negative power as well. In the end, it is your personal choice which aspect of religion you want to show to the public. ■

For more information: www.manuelakalsky.net and www.nieuwwij.nl

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Note

1. T. Sundermeier, *Den Fremden verstehen. Eine praktische Hermeneutik*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Göttingen, 184-185 (transl. MK).

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