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# **Post-Christian, Post-Christendom, and Post-Modern Europe: Towards the Interaction of Missiology and the Social Sciences**

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## **Abstract**

Three concepts are often used in missiological literature relating to the West. These are “post-Christian,” “post-Christendom,” and “post-modern.” Often, they have been used as if they are more or less synonyms without much precision or reflection. By relating them to different strands in social theory around “secularization,” this article suggests how these terms can be defined more precisely. In this way the author intends to stimulate the discussion between missiology and the social sciences within the context of Western Europe. On the basis of a more exact definition of these terms, areas for further research are indicated. As descriptive concepts these “post” labels invite us to explore their interdependence, mirroring the secularization debate within the sociology of religion. As heuristic concepts they raise questions about the social construction of secularized Europe within missiology. Finally, they may shed light on different social spaces for Christian mission in Europe.

## **Keywords**

Europe, secularization, post-Christian, post-Christendom, post-modern, social sciences

## **1. Introduction: Missiology and the Social Sciences**

Both sociologists of religion and missiologists are fascinated by the current state of religion in Western Europe. The decline of European Christianity in particular draws their attention and provokes their continuing analysis. This decline is even more remarkable since Christianity has always been a missionary religion, eager to win new adherents (cf. Stark 2001a: chapter 2).<sup>1</sup> One

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<sup>1</sup> In this article I am primarily concerned with this witnessing and inviting dimension of Christian mission, without claiming that this definition is exhaustive (cf. Scherer 1987: 37: “The

would expect that this mutual field of interest leads to a wealth of interaction between scholars from these different fields. However, this is hardly the case. From a sociologist's viewpoint this may be explained as vigilance against the "unscientific" (i.e., non-empirical, normative, theological) character of much missiological reflection. Perhaps, some cultural prejudice is also involved, since "the aim of converting others or proselytism is one of the least appealing aspects of religion to academic children of the Enlightenment" (Montgomery 2003:194). It remains somewhat strange however, that so many scholars of religion overlook the missionary dimension of Christianity, since this religion can hardly be understood without its border-crossing mentality. Christianity's missiological reflections on its loss of thousands of people every day in Europe should draw more interest from social scientists who study religion.<sup>2</sup>

Missiologists, on the other hand, share a long tradition of involvement in the social sciences. However, there are some issues impeding a serious interaction with the sociology of religion in Western Europe. Before Europe was (re)discovered as a "mission field," missiologists generally confined their interest to (cultural) anthropology, given their traditional focus on the exotic, often small-scale and non-literate societies of the South and the East (Taber 2000:93). As sociology has been developed particularly for the study of industrial, Western societies, their familiarity with this discipline has lagged behind.<sup>3</sup> Second, within the mainstream missiological discussion of the West a philosophical or systematic-theological framework is dominant, preventing a thorough interaction between theological and sociological analysis. As far as the social sciences come into view, they are considered as important representatives of a Western *worldview*, just like philosophy was in its earlier days. In other words, the social sciences are seen in the framework of "ideologies" and "beliefs" (David Bosch), but not as genuine discussion partners in their own right.<sup>4</sup> Third, this

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heart of mission is always making the gospel known where it would not be known without a special and costly act of boundary-crossing witness").

<sup>2</sup> Few social scientists study Christian mission in general, let alone Christian mission in Europe. Some examples: Stark 2001b; Martin 2002: esp. 28–70; Chambers 2005 (on a regional level).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Montgomery 1999: xiii: "[M]issiologists may not have had an overdose of anthropology, but at least they need a balancing dose of sociology."

<sup>4</sup> Bosch 1991: 495: "For more than a millennium and a half systematic theology's only dialogue partner was philosophy. How can it, however, in the contemporary world, afford to ignore the social sciences?" It is telling that Bosch presents *systematic* theology as the first dialogue partner of the social sciences, rather than practical theology. His determination by a philosophical "worldview" approach is illustrated by the sentences that immediately follow the quote above: "*Even more important*, how can it afford to disregard anti-Christian ideologies and the beliefs of

lack of interaction is caused by the incongruence of basic concepts that are used by social scientists and missiologists. Part of this pertains to the difference between normative and descriptive concepts, as for instance in the use of words like “Christian” or “conversion.” However, when missiologists do employ concepts derived from sociological discourse, they tend to use them selectively and sometimes without much reflection. One can think here of concepts like “believing without belonging” (Davie 1994), the “desecularization” of the world (Berger 1999), or all the talk about a “post-secular” society (Habermas 2008). Especially in popular theological discourse these concepts seem to function sometimes as magic words, arousing unfounded optimism about the future of European Christianity.

These critical observations left aside, we cannot do without conceptual lenses. Without them it is impossible to understand what we see. They have a “diagnostic” function, meaning that they focus our attention toward certain features as key to the future of our societies, while neglecting others. In other words, there is a relationship between preferences for certain labels at the expense of others, and one’s missiological view of Western Europe today. In this article I discuss three of these “diagnostic concepts” that appear in more serious literature, and inspire many missiological thinkers in this age of “post-everything” (cf. Kirk 2006: chapter 10; Bosch 1995:1). These labels are “post-Christian,” “post-Christendom” and “post-modern.” Sometimes their meaning is blurred by the tendency of writers to use them more or less as synonyms, weakening their analytical power (Murray 2009:197–198). Moreover, these terms are usually defined philosophically and historically, thus reinforcing the worldview bias in much missiological analysis of Europe. I will suggest instead that these terms are related to different dimensions of the social-scientific concept of “secularization.” This will help us to define them more precisely. Hopefully, this will also raise awareness of social theory among missiologists, and thus open the field for a more satisfactory exchange between the disciplines, as they study the fate of Christianity in Europe.

I conclude this article by briefly pointing at two possible routes for further (cooperative) research by missiologists and social scientists. First, a more precise definition of important missiological concepts by relating them to social theory invites us to explore their interdependence. Second, the discussion of

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people of other faiths?” (italics mine). For another example, in the same vein, see Taber 2000: 104. In fact, Taber’s discussion of the interaction between missiology and the social sciences, is almost completely determined by a worldview-driven approach.

these three concepts may point at different “social spaces” for Christian mission in Western Europe.

## 2. Secularization

In Western Christendom the term “secular” originally referred to the non-sacral nature of earthly rulers. They belonged to the earthly and temporal realm, referred to with the Latin word *saeculum*. Besides, the word “secular” was used to denote activities or functions that were not specifically religious, like baking bread or horse breeding. The term “secularization” was first used to signify the expropriation by the state of monasteries, and other possessions of the church. Today the term “secularization” has become a catchword for a process in which the realm of the “secular” increases at the expense of the “religious” or “sacred” sphere, as societies become more modern.<sup>5</sup> This process must be distinguished from “secularism,” as an ideological aspiration to make societies more “secular” (i.e. less religious), or as a world-view that considers a non-religious attitude as the most “normal,” “thinking” or “modern” way of life. Secularism can be an implicit assumption in secularization theories, and as a political ideology it can lead to (more) secularization, but it is not identical with it.

In modern social theory different causes of secularization are suggested, connected with various research paradigms. Among others, the rise of science and rational explanations of the world since early modernity (classical: Max Weber; cf. Gerth 1979:281–282), the pluralisation of Western societies since the Reformation (Berger 1967a), government policy (laicization),<sup>6</sup> increasing existential security since the Second World War (Norris 2004), and failing transmission of faith between generations, especially in the late 20th century (Crockett 2006) have all been suggested as drivers of secularization. This variety of approaches already suggests that there is no single “secularization paradigm.” It is rather a collection of theories,<sup>7</sup> operating on different levels of analysis, and using different definitions of “secularization” on each level

<sup>5</sup> For definitions of “secular” and “sacred,” see Coleman 1990:16–25.

<sup>6</sup> For example in France, Russia, and former East Germany. For different political attitudes against Christianity and church in Europe, see also Martin 1978.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., Hadden 1987:588: “a hotchpotch of loosely employed ideas”; Casanova 1994:211: three “very different, uneven and unintegrated propositions.” Cf. Bruce 2002:39: “There is no secularization theory.”

(Sommerville 1998:249–253). In contemporary discussions at least five definitions of “secularization” are in currency:

1. *Differentiation*. The prime example of this is the separation of church and state (Swatos 1999:214), eventually allowing people to develop full political identities without being religious. This separation went along with the increasing independence of societal institutions (like science, education, art, health care) from the church. In short, religion (Christianity) lost its social function of societal legitimation, and thus at least a part of its power (Dobbelaere 2002:29). Our public institutions and practices have been made independent of any reference to God or the church. This in itself is perfectly compatible with the vast majority of people believing in God, and practicing their religion. The United States is an obvious example. This shows that there is no *necessary* connection between this type of secularization and individual loss of faith (see below, type 5). For example, in some European countries most people are quite irreligious, even if church and state are not completely separated (for example, Denmark). In short, while disagreement remains as to the extent of secularization on all levels discussed below, there is a widely shared conviction that the thesis of differentiation remains the valid core of the secularization paradigm (Casanova 1994:212).<sup>8</sup> In this respect all modern societies are secular, although not in the same degree.
2. *Rationalization*. As a consequence of societal differentiation, institutions developed their own rational ideologies, leaning on scientific insights, and separate from religious norms (Luckmann 1967:101). Thus, the realm of the “secular” (submitted to human rational planning) expanded. Having lost its position as the sacred centre of society, the church became an institution alongside others, specialized in religion. Churches had to obey the new rules: they had to rationalize. The pluralistic market situation forced the religious institutions to market their own traditions, and to strive for efficiency and professionalism in doing so (Dobbelaere 2002:35). However, this rationalizing of ecclesial practice had been prepared for a long time already by Protestantism. According to Peter Berger, following Weber, Protestantism may be seen as a secularizing force in itself through its rejection of “mystery, miracle and magic” (Berger 1967a:111). A strong

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<sup>8</sup> Even a committed critic of secularization theory states: “If this were all what secularization means, there would be nothing to argue about” (Stark 1999:252).

emphasis on the absolute difference between God and his creation may lead to a “secularized” view of the world, as nothing more than a huge resource of time, space and matter.

3. *Privatization.* In a society with “religious” and “secular” institutions with dynamic activities, religion loses much of its power to influence all of society. Consequently, according to some social theorists, its primary focus shifts to the “private” realm of subjective spirituality and family life. For decisions in politics or business it becomes largely irrelevant whether one believes or not, and therefore religions adapt to the new situation, withdrawing from public life (Luhmann 1982). Of course, it is important here to distinguish between a descriptive theory of privatization (“in modern societies religion tends to privatize”) and normative ideas (“in modern society religion should be private”). As far as description goes, it seems that the modern inevitability of privatized religion has been exaggerated. José Casanova claims to have shown “that privatization is not a modern structural trend” (Casanova 1994:215).<sup>9</sup> In fact, recent research suggests that while declining in numbers, the remaining Christians in Western countries emphasize the public relevance of their faith even more (Achterberg 2009).
4. *Pluralisation.* When the ancient sacral union between church, state and society collapses, spaces are opened for new religious “providers.” In its first stage this occurred only within Christianity, with the rise of Protestantism as its main example. Later, new options emerged, like “secular humanism” and/or atheism, but also new religious movements, New Age, and so forth. Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor wants to add this pluralisation to the existing definitions of “secularization.” He defines it as “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.” In this sense, virtually every Western country is secular, including to some extent the United States, while most Islamic societies in the Middle East are not (Taylor 2007:2–4). The loss of ecclesiastical monopolies and the decline of Christian belief and practice among large people groups, in combination with a multiplication of alternatives, have led to societies in which there is nothing self-evident about being a Christian. Thus, with this definition Taylor emphasizes secularity as a “lived experience,” in addition to a social phenomenon. Living in a secular age affects the manner in which people are religious or not; their

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<sup>9</sup> Casanova’s claim has generally been received with approval. See further Furseth <sup>2</sup>2007:97–107.

religiosity or irreligiosity is characterized by continuing reflection on their own life choices. They live in a world of options, which can easily turn into challenges. However, other analyses of this pluralistic predicament are possible. For example, advocates of “Rational Choice” approaches of religion defend the thesis that a multiplication of options (especially in societies where religious monopolies used to exist) stimulates religious involvement, because there is a more varied religious supply, whereas church personnel is forced to work harder and to be more creative in a religious market situation (cf. Furseth 2006:117–120; Davie 2007:67–88).

5. *Individual loss of faith.* Secularization can finally mean that people turn away from God, and quit going to church (or become de-Christianized). In popular discourse this is usually what people mean when they discuss “secularization.” However, the decline of religious beliefs and practices is, admittedly, a “dominant historical trend in many modern Western, particularly European, societies,” but not in all of them (Casanova 1994:213–214). Also, the causal connections between this type of secularization and the other four are subject to ongoing debate (Dobbelaere 2002:165–195). After all, differentiation and rationalization happened long before the massive decline of religious beliefs and practices in Western Europe began to take shape. It appears very difficult to establish a clear, unequivocal relationship between modernity and the decline of religious faith in general.<sup>10</sup> Social reality is more complex than that.

Obviously, when using the word “secularization,” it is important to know which definition we imply. The term is particularly complicated in such a phrase as “the secularization of the church” (cf. Sommerville 1998:251–252). This could mean that a religious organization has become a secular one, i.e. that it has separated itself completely from religious legitimation (definition 1 above). It could mean that this church has adopted rational procedures, organizational forms and strategies from other, non-religious organizations, while maintaining its self-definition of a church (definition 2). It could also mean that this church has transformed its message in such a way that it has lost its “prophetic,” public appeal, by completely focussing on “inner,” subjective and private emotions and beliefs (definition 3). It may mean that this church has turned “liberal” by emphasizing that Christianity is just an option among

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<sup>10</sup> Of course, this does not mean that modernity is equally friendly to all kinds of religious faith.

many, and that it is perfectly fine to assume another life-view if that makes one happier. Or, on the contrary, it could imply that this church has turned “fundamentalist” by shutting out the world with all its options, and underlining very rigid ideas and practices to which Christians have to conform (definition 4). And finally, it could mean that the members of the church are staying away from meetings and are losing their faith (definition 5).

In a North-western European context it seems undeniable that secularization as defined above in types one, two, four and five occurs. On type three the jury is still out, but it seems that the burden of evidence lies with those who want to defend that privatization is an inevitable characteristic of religion in modern societies. It remains a point of discussion however if and how these four or five meanings are interdependent. Also, it is important to note that type two (rationalization) has an ambiguous relationship with Christianity. It may be as much a product of Christianity as a cause of its decline. It is important to be aware of these problems when we discuss some heuristic concepts used by missiologists. To this discussion I now turn.

### 3. Three Concepts in Contemporary Missiological Discourse

#### 3.1. *Post-Christian*

In his book *A Secular Age* Charles Taylor argues that modern Western secularity is significantly a product of the long history of reform movements within Western Christianity (Taylor 2007: esp. parts I–II). The reform effort entailed raising standards of belief and practice of whole populations to a level that formerly had been important only for religious elites. This set in motion a continuing “purification of thought” (Warner 2010:16) that would not only result in a greater commitment of some groups to a Christian life but also in antireligious attitudes of others. Thus, the possibility of a fully secular society is an unanticipated and unintended result of these attempts to reform the masses of Europe, and to clean up religious beliefs and practices. In this respect we can say that a “secular” society is truly (and ironically) a “post-Christian” society. Secularity in all the senses mentioned above could not have emerged (at least not in this form) in a non-Christian society.

However, “post-Christian” is not a synonym for “secular.” First, there is an obvious historical dimension to the term “post-Christian.” For example, India and China may be “secular” (in some senses), but they are not “post-Christian.” “Post-Christianity” is a special character of European (or Western)

“secularity.” We are secular in a post-Christian way. Second, the concept “post-Christian” relates especially to definition five above rather than to definitions one to four (1–4). A society with secular institutions, but with a largely church-going and praying population would not be seen as “post-Christian” by most observers. To me, it does not make much sense to call the United States or Poland “post-Christian” – or, for that matter, Turkey “post-Islamic.” Also, a society that is pluralistic in the sense that there are many religious and other options, but where the majority of the population opts for Christian beliefs and practices, can hardly be called “post-Christian.” Again, the United States comes into view. However, secularity in the fifth sense (a largely unbelieving population, possibly combined with an established church) could be defined as “post-Christian.” Great Britain and Denmark are post-Christian countries, even if there is a privileged national church. Here, “post-Christian” simply means that the majority of the people in these countries who used to be Christians are no longer identified as Christians.

So, I propose that when missiologists use the term “post-Christian,” they do not refer to the secularization of institutions, but to changes in the beliefs, motivations and practices of people.<sup>11</sup> Post-Christian societies are societies where so many individuals have declined from Christian beliefs and practices that Christians have become or are becoming a minority. Also, it could signify the diminishing importance and relevance of Christian beliefs and practices on the motivational level, even if people do not leave the church formally. Where many people used to invoke Christian teachings to motivate their own behaviour and decisions, but they do no longer so, a post-Christian society is in the making.

### 3.2. *Post-Christendom*

The word “Christendom” appeared for the first time in English in the ninth century, as a translation of Latin *christianitas*. Historically, it indicated the geographical area, roughly equivalent with the territory of the modern European Union, where Christian kings ruled. There is an analogy here with the contemporary Islamic use of *dar al-islam* (“the house of Islam”). This concept of Christian government took shape as an historical experiment, or rather as a

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. J.C. Hoekendijk’s definition of “*post-christelijk*” (post-Christian) in Hoekendijk 1952:546–547: Christianity as a worldview does not appeal to people any longer. However, Hoekendijk combines this with characteristics he labels as “*post-christendommelijk*,” and that can best be grouped under the label “post-Christendom” (see below).

series of experiments, after the emperor Constantine issued his Edict of Toleration (313 AD).<sup>12</sup> Here we meet a second meaning of the term “Christendom”: a long-stretched period of time in which “there were close ties between the leaders of the church and those in positions of secular power, where the laws purported to be based on Christian principles, and where, apart from certain clearly defined outsider communities, every member of the society was assumed to be a Christian” (McLeod 2003:1). As to the close of this era opinions differ. If we take narrow church-state relationships and the use of legal force in religious matters as a criterion, Christendom ended in most countries around the eighteenth century. If we draw the circle wider and include massive participation in Christian rites, the propagation of Christian politics, or a Christian culture, Christendom is still very much alive in some European countries. Even a “secular” version of the Christendom “narrative” has been observed as an element in European intellectual debate today.<sup>13</sup>

From a missiological perspective major criticisms have been levelled against Christendom. All these criticisms turn on one hinge, that is, the Christendom presumption that the world could be divided in a Christian and a “pagan” territory. The consequences of this presumption have been vast. First, the great missionary movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth century was permeated by it. Worldwide mission was seen as a project of spreading Christian (i.e. Western) civilization to the ends of the earth. This project could unashamedly be referred to with terms like “conquest” or “crusade,” thus creating the impression that Christian mission was intricately connected with colonialism and empire building (Bosch 1991:262–345; Smith 2003). Unfortunately, this basic distinction between “Christian” and “non-Christian” worlds prevented the development of a missiology of the West for a long time. By and large Europeans were considered Christians, even if they needed more education and greater zeal. Second, one of the results of Christendom was the lowering of standards of doctrine and practice (Kreider 1999). If everyone must be considered a Christian in some sense, the difference between the church and

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<sup>12</sup> For a theological reflection, see O’Donovan 1996: esp. 193ff. See also Paas 2007: chapters 5 and 7.

<sup>13</sup> Perkins 2004:346: “. . . the Christendom narrative continues to shape European thought, culture, politics and identity-consciousness, even when divorced from its religious roots. . . .” Cf. *ibid.*, 10 n. 37. One of the carriers of this narrative today is the Christian Democratic wing of European politics, whereas some nationalistic parties (e.g. in Denmark and the Netherlands), employ it in a context of opposition to Islam.

the world tends to fade. This has severely affected Christian theology in the West, as for example in the fields of ethics, ecclesiology, and leadership. And third, the use of coercion and control were part of the Christendom model of shaping Christian societies, a feature that still lingers in some contemporary dreams of “Christian politics” (Paas 2007: chapter 8). According to Christendom-critics this model of control and domination has resulted in a long-term suspicion towards the church and its leaders among Europeans (e.g., Kreider 2001).

All this means that the label “post-Christendom” is often employed with a positive spin in missiological discourse. A whole cluster of arguments is involved here. First, a distinction is made between Christianity and Christendom. There was Christianity for three centuries before Christendom appeared, and in many countries today there is a very lively Christian presence without the assumptions of Christian theocracy or a Christian culture. So, it is concluded that the death of Christendom does not necessarily mean the end of Christianity in Europe. On the contrary, the separation of church and state allows the church to operate in its own social space as the radical counter movement it was meant to be in the first place. Whatever culture emerges from the ruins of Christendom might offer tremendous opportunities to tell and live the gospel as a message that is radically new again. Second, those who see “post-Christendom” in a positive light often emphasize that Europe was not all that “Christian” in former times. Therefore, changes in the balance of power between church and state need not have a negative effect on Christian belief and practice. On the contrary, it might liberate religion from its institutional chains. Here, theologians follow an analogous reasoning as social scientists who apply Rational Choice Theory to European secularization. In both cases the suggestion seems to be that in terms of “real” belief and practice, the changes have not been so deep and destructive at all. In fact, the increase of individual freedom, the pluralisation of society, and the loss of ecclesiastical power open spaces for a genuine voluntary commitment to God and the church, perhaps for the first time in European history. By and large, secularization affects the superstructure of religion, but not the heart of it – individual piety.

Obviously, the post-Christendom discourse is an important perspective on mission in Europe today, even if it applies less for large areas of Europe, especially in the South and the East. It does not only have descriptive value, but it can also serve as a heuristic lens through which one can view the emerging cultural landscape in (Western) Europe. Contributors to important think tanks, like the “Gospel and Our Culture Network,” the “Missiology of

Western Culture Project,” and the “Anabaptist Network” have proven this sufficiently.<sup>14</sup> However, as soon as the term is used to cover the whole story of religious change in Europe as in some recent missiological contributions, it loses much of its explanatory power. For example, in his valuable book *Post-Christendom* Stuart Murray breaks down “post-Christendom” in seven transitions: from the centre to the margins, from majority to minority, from settlers to sojourners, from privilege to plurality, from control to witness, from maintenance to mission, and from institution to movement (Murray 2004:19). Here, descriptive and prescriptive features are so intermingled that it can hardly be established what is fact and what is programmatic. In my opinion, “post-Christendom” is a more useful term if we limit its use to those aspects of the cultural changes that are directly related to politics and power.

Thus, the term “post-Christendom” highlights in the first place the collapse of ecclesiastical power in Europe. Following the separation of church and state in many countries a process of marginalisation of the church has taken place. A post-Christendom Europe is a continent that has left behind more than a millennium of close church-state cooperation, without being able or willing to erase all the vestiges of this history. Subsequently, post-Christendom signals the fragmentation of culture in the West. No longer can a single cultural (Christian) narrative be assumed. Instead, the church is forced to find its own place within a society as one of its institutions. In short, as a descriptive term “post-Christendom” corresponds especially with the first definition of secularization (definition 1) as “differentiation.” However, it plays this tune in a more historical and theological key.

### 3.3. *Post-Modern*

The term “post-modern,” finally, is used to explain a wide range of cultural phenomena, like pluralism, consumerism, relativism, hyper-individualism, and the collapse of authority. As such it is a rather fuzzy concept. Also, it is a matter of debate whether post-modernity is really something new or primarily a continuation of modernity. I suggest the latter. What is called “post”-modernity

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<sup>14</sup> See [www.gocn.org](http://www.gocn.org), [www.anabaptistnetwork.com](http://www.anabaptistnetwork.com). The ‘Missiology of Western Culture Project’ (1992–1997) was an ecumenical project by Western missiologists, conducting research in seven areas (the arts, ecclesiology, epistemology, social structures and systems, history, the individual, and health and healing). Its results are gradually appearing in print. Christendom was studied by the History Group of the project. The Group has published the following works: Kreider 2001 and McLeod 2003.

is based on the same process of reflexive analysis that characterized modernity from the outset. To simplify the issue: pre-modernity can be described as an era of “natural knowledge.” A pre-modern farmer just “knew” that the earth was flat, he “knew” that kings were destined to rule over him, he “knew” that the old woman next-door was a witch, and he “knew” that his fields needed a blessing in order to have a good harvest. All of this knowledge was mainly unreflective, a result of participating in social practices. It was anchored in ontologies of God and nature. Now, modernity can be characterized as a series of attempts to separate “real” from “false” knowledge, a quest for certainty by the application of human reason. Again, put as simply as possible, modernity’s prime questions were: “Why is this so?” and “Who says?” It was an attempt to find the very foundations of knowledge and belief, foundations that needed no further proof.

As a result the fundamental ontologies started to erode. In the end, nothing seemed as “natural” as it was first believed. Nothing is “just the way it is”; it can be analyzed, criticized, abolished, or reorganized on a different basis. However, once this process has begun, it cannot be stopped. It does not halt when we have discovered (or invented) scientific progress, human rights, democracy, and secular societies. “Radical reflexivity,” as Anthony Giddens calls it (Giddens 1991:16–21), is like an acid; it keeps eating away certainties. Thus, it would be only a matter of time when modernity started to turn in on itself. The detached, objective “self,” the unmoved mover of all quests for certainty, became “de-centred” when its historicity and locality were revealed by the sociology of knowledge and language philosophy (cf. Thiselton 1995). In short, the post-modern condition “pertains to one’s awareness of the deconstructibility of all systems of meaning and truth” (Vanhoozer 2003a:13). For late-modern people it is very difficult, if not impossible, to believe anything at all with the same “innocence” as their ancestors.

Of course, this affects Christianity, but the “post” element in “post-modernity” emphasizes that it affects alternatives for Christianity just as well. Today all the great narratives of modernity, meant to replace the old orders of belief and social organization, are under attack. According to Jean-François Lyotard, this is the main characteristic of post-modernity, which he termed as “Incredulity toward meta-narratives” (Lyotard 1979). In this context, even the word “post-secular” is sometimes used. This does not mean that Europe is any less secular than it used to be. Jürgen Habermas, the first major European thinker to use the term, defines a post-secular society as a society “in which religion maintains a public influence and relevance, while the secularist certainty that

religion will disappear worldwide in the course of modernisation is losing ground” (Habermas 2008).<sup>15</sup> Here, Habermas does not predict the resurgence of Christianity, but he announces the end of *secularism* as a pseudo-scientific ideology (cf. Habermas 2006:16). As explained above, this secularism must be distinguished from secularization as a social phenomenon. Furthermore, although it may be true that the weakening of secularism in a post-modern age allows more space for religious discourse in public, the room for orthodox Christianity has not necessarily become any larger (Vanhoozer 2003a:18).

Also, we must be aware of the typical modern features in what presents itself as “post-modern.” It is the claim of a certain trendy “post-modernism,” according to Charles Taylor, “That the age of Grand Narratives is over, that we cannot believe in these any more.” But in fact, the post-modern writers make use of the same reasoning as can be witnessed through the whole era of modernity: “ONCE we were into grand stories, but NOW we have realized their emptiness and we proceed to the next stage. This is a familiar refrain” (Taylor 2007:716–717). In short, the claim that the grand stories have come to an end assumes all the features of a grand story itself. Thus, basically, “post-modernity” has not left behind the modern story of progress, in which everyone who has not seen the light is declared to be a “modernist” dinosaur. Christian thinkers and practitioners who accept this rigid “modern” vs. “postmodern” paradigm, as for example many of those who belong to the “emerging church” family, would do wise to consider this.

Anyhow, the claim of “post-moderns,” that our age does no longer have one dominating regime of knowledge and belief, is included in the fourth meaning of the “secular,” mentioned in section two (2): an ever-expanding “supernova” (Charles Taylor) of worldview-options is part and parcel of late-modern life. Every stance can and will be questioned, contested, and attacked from different angles. As far as this happens with an emphasis on the locality, historicity and “embodiment” of all positions and truth claims, we might call this a “post-modern” style of reasoning; as long as we understand that such a style has been part of the repertoire of modernity already for a long time.<sup>16</sup> This reasoning comes in varieties, however. For example, American post-modernism is more optimistic than French post-modernism (Thiselton 2006). Besides, “post-modern” styles of reasoning are not accepted to the same extent everywhere. For example, in the social sciences post-modernism is more per-

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Ward 1997:xxii: “The emergence of the postmodern has fostered post-secular thinking.”

<sup>16</sup> For example, in the sceptic tradition, in the Romantic stream of modernity, and in the anti-humanistic attacks of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.

vasive than in the natural sciences (Rosenau 1992).<sup>17</sup> Also, not every practice allows a “post-modern”, thoroughly reflexive and deconstructive attitude. Remarkably few people are post-modernists while driving a car or buying a house. Of course, this very fact can support the claim that our beliefs are context-dependent, at least to some degree, and this awareness can generate types of post-modern theologies, emphasizing localized social practice instead of universal theory as the source of knowledge.<sup>18</sup>

To what extent is there a resonance between post-modernity and the second definition of “secularization,” viz. rationalization? In classic secularization discourse, especially in its ideological versions, an opposition has often been framed between “religion” and “rationality.” Seen through this lens, secularization must be considered as a historical battle between two “Grand Narratives.” This very powerful idea has influenced the debate around secularization in theological circles from the 1960s. Today, the idea that a “religious” society will be replaced completely by a rational “makeable” society subjected to human control may be past its finest hour. In our age the scientific writings of Richard Dawkins and others seem to be revealed for what they are – “fundamentalist” reactions against the collapse of secular ideologies (Suriano 2008). Thus, if rationalization is understood as an unstoppable historical process, continually pushing back religion, post-modernism clearly shows us the limitations of this line of thinking. Consequently, post-modernist criticism of a world supposedly under rational control is also directed against “rational” ways of doing mission, determined by finding “proven methods” and developing “effective strategies.”<sup>19</sup>

As far as diagnostic concepts are concerned, there is no clear missiological counterpart for the sociological discourse of “rationalization,” however. When missiologists describe a “rationalized” world, they tend to emphasize the ambiguity of institutional rationality. On the one hand, it has produced “a certain amount of emancipation, humanization, and stability.” On the other hand, “oppression and violence, widely experienced in today’s world, can to a large extent be directly related to this aspect of modernity” (Hoedemaker 1998:9). As far as the second aspect is seen as the bigger issue, it fits neatly into the

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<sup>17</sup> Of course, this does not mean that there are not many post-modern views on natural science, but they have not influenced theory and experiment to the same extent as in the social sciences.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. the examples in Vanhoozer 2003b.

<sup>19</sup> These kinds of criticisms can be found abundantly in the “emerging church” and “post-evangelical” literature.

post-modern analysis of global society. Nevertheless, the question remains whether Christian mission can be satisfied with merely criticizing modern rationality, without acknowledging its own interest in the modern “disenchantment” of the world. According to Bert Hoedemaker, Christianity’s mission in this world is to contribute to the “conversion of rationality” by an “inquiry into the nature of true worldliness and true rationality.” This can only happen when Christianity is aware of its own ambivalent relationship with modern rationality (Hoedemaker 1998:10, 62).<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the “post” element in “post-modern” must not be emphasized too much. From a missiological point of view there are elements of a *modern* world that are worth defending.

#### 4. Conclusions and Trajectories for Further Research

As I have said before, the different “diagnostic concepts” used by missiologists, have a descriptive and a heuristic function. By relating these concepts to strands in secularization theory I have shown how they can be used with more precision. Terms like “post-Christian,” “post-Christendom,” and “post-modern” do not mean the same; they describe separate dimensions of “secularization” in Western Europe.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this. First, among sociologists of religion there is a continuing debate as to the interdependence of different strands of “secularization.” Is there a necessary or only a contingent connection between, say, differentiation and de-Christianization? To what extent are interrelationships between these dimensions of secularization influenced by different historical and cultural circumstances throughout (Western) Europe? Does pluralisation foster de-Christianization or is it an opportunity for the

<b>Secularization in social theory</b>	<b>Diagnostic concepts in missiology</b>
Differentiation	Post-Christendom
Rationalization	Post-Modernity
Pluralisation	Post-Modernity
De-Christianization	Post-Christianity

<sup>20</sup> For a sympathetic discussion of Hoedemaker’s views, cf. Murphy 1999:102–119.

revitalization of religious traditions? I believe, once missiologists have defined their own labels more exactly, they can benefit from these discussions by asking similar questions. To what extent do their own preferred labels assume each other? What can be learnt from a “post-Christendom” discourse by those who prefer to speak of a “post-Christian” society, and vice versa? How does a post-Christendom situation create new opportunities for mission? To what extent have historic church-state arrangements influenced the current attitudes of many Europeans towards Christianity? What does belief in God look like in a rationalized society? Which theological and spiritual consequences must be drawn from an “Anabaptist” analysis of European history? Does the “post-Christendom” discourse with its emphasis on small, committed communities take seriously enough the “post-modern” tendency to less-committed, tentative positions? Does a “rational” and “strategic” approach of mission foster de-Christianization rather than counter it?

Second, as for the heuristic function of these concepts, it is clear that missiologists often prefer certain diagnostic terms above others. To mention just one example, some advocates of a “post-Christendom” approach consider the term “post-Christian” as too pessimistic. It suggests that the religious changes in Europe not only destroyed some societal arrangements and power structures, leaving individual religiosity intact, but have affected the faith of individuals as well. From a social science perspective the “post-Christian” discourse agrees with stronger versions of the Secularization Thesis. However, so the critics say, the use of words like “post-Christian” wrongly assumes that Europeans used to be more churchgoing and God-fearing than they are now. Also, it may allow unchallenged or even unrecognized assumptions to undermine our attempts to reform mission, church and discipleship in contemporary culture (cf. Murray 2009:195–2008). In short, the term “post-Christian” may sound too much as a depressing fate that renders futile all attempts to imagine a Christian future in Europe, even if only after one or two generations of *Verelendung*.<sup>21</sup> Seeing Europe through a “post-Christendom” lens, however, would be a much more hopeful perspective in terms of Christian mission.

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<sup>21</sup> Murray 2004:8: “But perhaps – if we have the courage to face into this future rather than hankering after a fading past, if we resist short-term strategies and pre-packaged answers, if we learn to be cross-cultural missionaries in our own society, and if we can negotiate the next forty years – whatever culture emerges from the ruins of Christendom might offer tremendous opportunities for telling and living out the Christian story in a society where this is largely unknown.”

As social scientists have argued, concepts like these are not just “objective” descriptions of our situation. They also help to construe it. If someone is deeply convinced that Europe is “post-Christendom” rather than “post-Christian,” and if he or she emphasizes the “post-secular” aspects of “post-modernity,” this may have creative effects for Christian mission. We tend to forget that social reality, objective as it may seem, is at least partly a human production (Berger 1967b:61–62, 78). The interpretations of actors influence their situations, as the famous Thomas theorem says: “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas 1928:572). From such a social constructionist perspective there is no autonomous and independent “secularized society,” but just different human ways to construe “secularity.” If someone prefers to consider our predicament as “post-secular” rather than “post-Christian,” and succeeds to convince many others of this perspective, this may change secularization itself. For sociologists of mission it may therefore be interesting to explore these social constructionist elements in missiological discourse.

Finally, defining these three conceptual approaches of Western Europe, and relating them to sociological theory, could help us to map the various pathways for Christian mission in this continent. I suggest that three “axes” of mission may be distinguished, using the three diagnostic concepts discussed above: a “post-Christian,” a “post-Christendom,” and a “post-modern” axis. The “post-Christendom” axis, for example, would entail that modern societies have arrived at an advanced stage of distinguishing different sectors of society, to such an extent that these sectors do no longer need a religious legitimation (i.e., differentiation). This leads to a paradoxical situation, in which the church on the one hand becomes marginalized as a societal institution, but on the other hand becomes more visible as a “religious” institution. From this situation at least three different missionary “strategies” may follow.

On the one end of this axis, churches may attempt to fight differentiation, by reclaiming their place in the centre of society. In its most robust form this attempt amounts to a close bond between Christianity and “civilization,” embodied in dreams of a Christian society, a baptized nation, and theocratic politics (e.g., Nichols 1999). Usually, this discourse is sustained by a strong claim of the necessary role of Christianity in Western culture. Without it individuals will fall into depraved lifestyles, and our culture will collapse. In some versions of this strategy churches may present themselves as the moral conscience of society, aiming at a kind of “established” position, even if the majority of the population are no church members. This strategy has been followed especially by the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, in their campaign of “re-evangelization” (cf. Walldorf 2002).

A more moderate strategy may be that churches accept to some extent the differentiation of society, and their own minority position. However, they claim that Europe's unique history is so entangled with Christianity that it will need the churches as storehouses of "memory." It may not be necessary that the majority of the population are Christians (in a strong sense), but to keep our culture alive a widely shared knowledge of Christian stories, symbols, and morality must be part of our common future. Here, churches may find a role as keepers of cultural traditions, educators, and providers of a shared language. This role can be reinforced by the fear for Islam in Europe. From a missiological perspective this position of the churches may contribute to a positive view of Christianity among Europeans, thus creating evangelistic possibilities. To a certain degree this evangelization will be accepted by those outside the church, since they understand that no tradition can stay alive without active participants. Thus, in this strategy the bond between Christianity and European civilization remains the core motivation, but it is presented in a way that is less presumptuous. Most Protestant mainline churches choose this strategy.

On the other extreme of this axis of "differentiation" one can find churches that embrace the "sectarian" option. They do not reject differentiation. On the contrary, they affirm their own place as an "opposite" of society. The ways of the world are indeed not the ways of the church. Here, the supposed bond between Christianity and Western civilization is denied or at least circumscribed. The church is not meant to keep whole societies together, and declare somehow everyone within the realm to be a "Christian." The link between Christianity and a moral community is maintained, however, but it is localized within the "religious sector," namely a (usually small) congregation of committed Christians. Potentially, societal differentiation allows churches to develop a distinctive Christian profile, by raising the standards of belief and behaviour for their members. This approach is reinforced by a strong rejection of Christendom, through identification with marginal Christian groups of history. It is no coincidence that "Anabaptist" views are currently among the most influential in any missiology of the West. A "radical" Christian lifestyle is necessarily a minority lifestyle, but it can contain a great witnessing potential, as long as it can make itself understandable to its environment. Of course, the main problem with this approach is the classic objection that one "cannot shut the world out." In other words, there is no such a thing as a "purely Christian realm," where a radical ethic can lived out in its fullness, without contamination by power games, exclusion, and the like.

Similar categories could be developed on the other two axes, distinguishing between more affirming and more rejecting positions of "post-Christianity"

(de-Christianization) and “post-modernity” (pluralisation). This is not the place to explore this further. In this article I have intended to show that a more precise definition of some popular diagnostic concepts, and relating them to social theory, can stimulate further reflection on Christian mission in Europe.

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### **L'Europe postchrétienne, postchrétienté et postmoderne: Vers une interaction de la missiologie et des sciences sociales**

Dans cet article, je traite de trois concepts souvent utilisés dans la littérature missiologique en direction de l'Occident, à savoir: «postchrétien», «postchrétienté» et «postmoderne». Ces concepts sont souvent utilisés sans beaucoup de précision et de réflexion. On les traite aussi comme s'ils étaient synonymes. En les reliant à différentes couches de théorie sociale autour du concept de «sécularisation», je propose de les définir avec plus de précision. Je souhaite ainsi stimuler la discussion entre la missiologie et les sciences sociales dans le contexte de l'Europe occidentale. Sur la base d'une définition plus exacte de ces termes, j'indique des champs de recherche future. En tant que concepts descriptifs, ces étiquettes «post» nous invitent à explorer leur interdépendance, à l'image du débat de la sécularisation en sociologie de la religion. En tant que concepts heuristiques, ils soulèvent des questions sur la construction sociale de l'Europe sécularisée en missiologie. Enfin, ils pourraient mettre en lumière différents espaces sociaux pour la mission chrétienne en Europe.

### **Post-christliches, post-christentümliches und post-modernes Europa. Zu einer Interaktion von Missiologie und Sozialwissenschaften**

In diesem Artikel behandle ich drei Begriffe, die in der missiologischen Literatur, die sich an das Abendland wenden, oft verwendet werden. Es geht um die Begriffe „post-christlich“, „post-christentümlich“ und „postmodern“. Sie werden oft ohne viel Genauigkeit oder Reflexion verwendet. Sie werden auch oft gebraucht, als wären sie mehr oder weniger synonym. Ich setze sie mit verschiedenen Richtungen der Sozialwissenschaften zum Thema „Säkularisierung“ in Beziehung und schlage vor, wie diese Begriffe genauer gefasst werden können. Damit möchte ich die Diskussion zwischen Missiologie und den Sozialwissenschaften im Kontext Westeuropas anre-

gen. Auf der Grundlage einer exakteren Definition dieser Begriffe weise ich auf weitere Forschungsgebiete hin. Da es sich um beschreibende Begriffe handelt, laden uns diese „post“-Etiketten ein, ihre wechselseitige Abhängigkeit zu studieren und die Säkularisationsdebatte in der Religionssoziologie wiederzuspiegeln. Als heuristische Begriffe führen sie zu Fragen über die soziale Bildung des säkularisierten Europa innerhalb der Missiologie. Schließlich können sie die verschiedenen sozialen Räume für christliche Mission in Europa beleuchten.